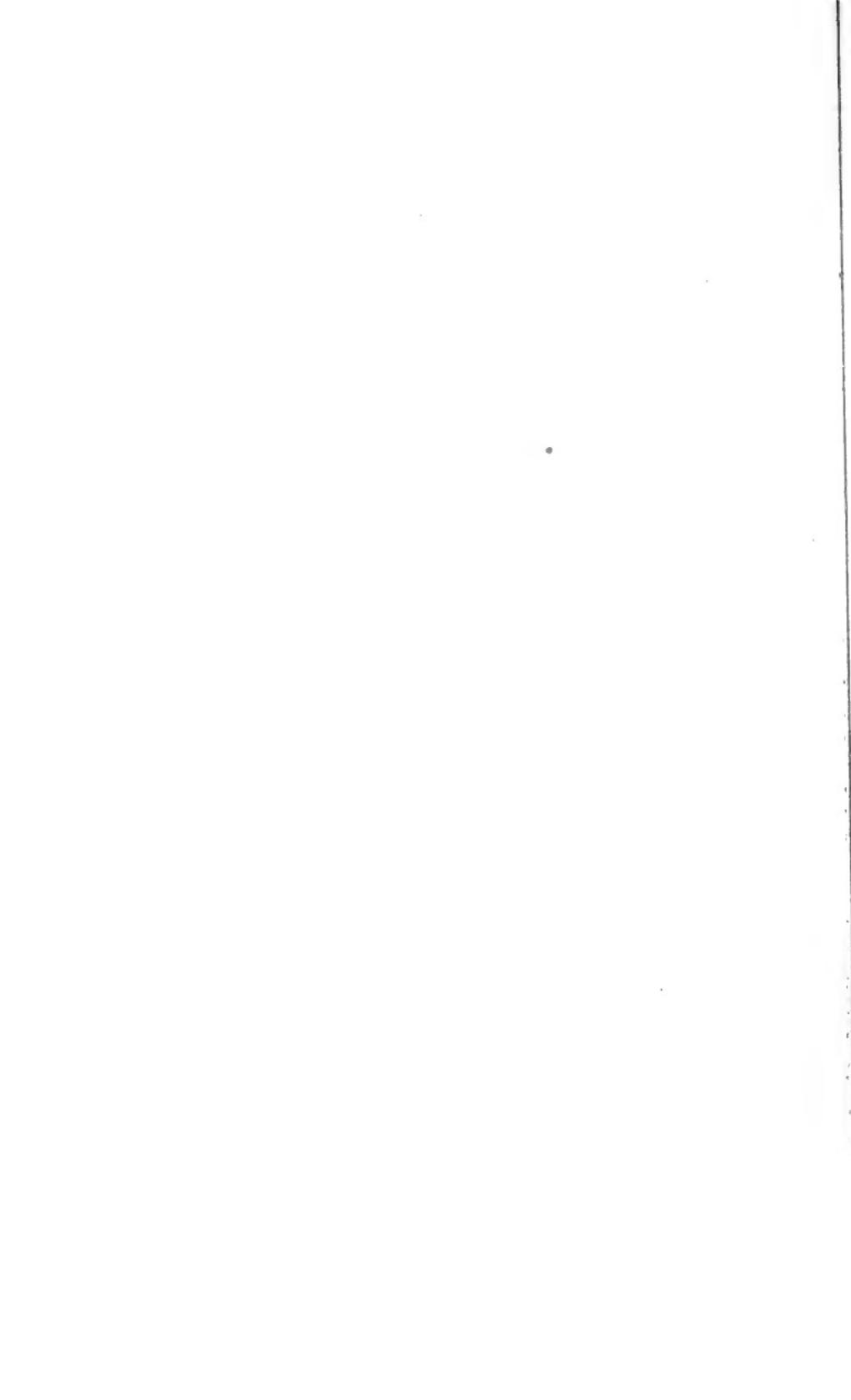


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THE MINISTER'S SON.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

ELLEN JENKINS.

MRS BENNETT felt a little flutter of excitement at the prospect of Ronald's examination, and anticipated entry into the Staff College. Things military were to her quite inscrutable, and after one or two courageous attempts to master the intricacies of ranks, brevets, Staff appointments, pay and pensions, and the still more perplexing list of expenses which her son assured her were absolutely necessary, she gave up all

further effort, and was content to accept everything he told her, and repeat it, if at all, exactly as he told it. The necessity for this latter caution became evident after one or two blunders had been explained to her,—when, for instance, he gently pointed out to her that she must not represent him to have said that only a battalion had been engaged at a particular spot, where he had spoken of a brigade.

“Is there so much difference? Dear, dear, it’s very difficult to make it all out,” said she, but was more careful thenceforth.

Ronald assured her that the chances were greatly against his attaining any particular and obvious benefit from his coming studies.

“All I want is, to show that I have done my utmost, and am eligible for anything if anybody should think of giving it to me. It is most unlikely that I should be selected out of the crowds of men quite as fit, and with social advantages that I have not.”

"Social advantages ought to make no sort of difference," said Mr Bennett, emphatically.

"Theoretically they do not, but among dozens of candidates choice must be made, and the duke or a general are more likely to notice some pleasant fellow whom they are constantly meeting, than to remember a candidate whose name they once read on a list in an office. I'm sure I should feel the same. 'Little kenn'd, the less cared for,' you know."

"It is natural, no doubt."

"But you have distinguished yourself so much," began Mrs Bennett.

"My dear mother, 'mair by guid luck than guid guiding;' and lots of other fellows have done more. Don't expect anything wonderful to happen to me, and then you won't be disappointed."

"A wiselike speech, Ronald. I must say you're a sensible laddie in spite of your red

coat," remarked his father; and Ronald felt that from him this was a compliment.

In spite of his warnings, Mrs Bennett continued to cherish hopes that some especial favour would be conferred upon him. A young man so deserving, so popular, and so determined to succeed, must surely be picked out of a crowd composed no doubt of hare-brained youths without half his good points. It seemed to her that as long as he lived and remained in Britain nothing could go wrong with her again; and as she bade him farewell, a little burst of motherly pride and tenderness made her lips quiver and her eyes overflow.

Ronald, on his part, was a little grave and anxious. Like all reserved men, he hated scenes, and even while he was leaving home, he was speculating as to the probable reception that would await him at the Waverley Station, where Mrs Jenkins was to meet him. She had informed him in her

last letter that by long saving she had got possession of a five-pound note, and that whatever money might be in her hands for household purposes she meant to take—it would probably not amount to a pound. In order to leave this little sum untouched, Ronald undertook to pay her fare to London ; and therefore, if she got away safely from Piershill, she was to meet him at the ticket-office some minutes before the hour of the train.

He was at the rendezvous in very good time, and having seen to his own luggage, bought an ‘Evening Express,’ and lounged about, apparently reading it, near the centre lamp, but with watchful glances directed towards the door. Presently, with a little air of uncertainty, and without replying to the porters who followed her, a small woman, clad in dark clothes, and wearing a thick veil, entered and looked round. Seeing Ronald, she hurried forward and put her

hand in his, looking up in his face with frightened and excited eyes.

"Here I am," she began in a loud whisper; "I managed so well." But Ronald cut her short.

"How do you do? Are you going south to-night? Can I see your luggage labelled for you?" he said, in distinct courteous tones.

"Thank you," said Ellen, bewildered at this reception. She herself was full of subdued excitement, and she could not understand the meaning of such a mode of address.

"What luggage have you? This box? Label for King's Cross. The lady had better have the bag in the carriage; it will serve as a footstool. And now let me take your ticket—over here," he said, turning to Ellen.

Mute now with surprise, Ellen followed him, and the moment they were out of ear-shot of the porters, he said rapidly—

"Behave as if we met by chance ; speak as little as you can. I will see you to a carriage, and come and speak to you at York. Is your husband likely to discover your flight soon ?"

"No ; he's gone up to the theatre—he'll not be home till late."

"That's all right."

As soon as he had taken the tickets, Ronald went along to the carriages and consulted one of those courteous guards who arrange their passengers so comfortably, as to the compartment in which Ellen should be placed.

"Can you find a compartment where there are any ladies ?—this lady is going up alone."

"Yes, sir ; there's one here — one lady going to York."

"Thanks ; that will do beautifully. You can have a side to yourself, you see," he said to Ellen, who murmured something, he did not hear what.

"I want a place myself, guard," continued Ronald.

"Smoking carriage, sir?—this way."

"You had better get in; I will come back and see that you are all right in a moment," said Ronald; and having deposited his plaid in his own seat, and got rid of the guard, he quickly returned to Ellen.

The lady for York had not yet taken her place, and Ronald, leaning into the carriage, not only screened his companion from observation, but had time to say all that was necessary.

"I thought you were coming with me," she began, almost tearfully; "I wanted to tell you such a lot, and to ask you a heap of things. I'm so frightened; and what am I to do when we get to King's Cross?"

"Listen; there is no time to waste words. I warned you that if you were to take this step, you must carry it through wisely, or you would be in a worse case than ever. I

have written for you to the hospital, and there is the reply—read it after we start. You can present yourself for approval to-morrow. I have inquired, you see, merely on behalf of a soldier's wife, giving no name—it was wisest." At another moment Ellen would have resented this temporary loss of dignity, but now she replied without heeding it.

" You think it is a good plan. I'm sure I'd know how to be a nurse."

" You can learn, I'm sure, for you will be gentle and patient. Keep your veil down, while any one is in the carriage, and don't talk."

" But if the lady speaks to me ?"

" Answer as little as you can. Say you're going to London, if she asks you ; but wrap yourself up, and lie down. You must pretend to be asleep, if you can't sleep."

" But why ?"

" My dear girl, don't you suppose there

will be a hue-and-cry after you? Do you want to be found out by anybody who recognises the description your husband will give of you?" said Ronald, rather impatiently.

"I see; I didn't think of that," replied Ellen, humbly. She was crushed for the moment by Ronald's seriousness, and thought in her foolish little heart that he had been much kinder when he came to see her at Piershill.

"I will find some quiet place where you can breakfast, and stay the night, when we reach London. You must get a cab, or take an omnibus, and be at the hospital at the hour named in that letter. Now try and remember this," he continued, more gently, but still in a decided tone of voice: "if you fail at St Martin's, I want you to try at one of the other hospitals; any one will tell you their names. If you fail entirely in your applications, you must write to me to the address on this bit of paper; but if

you succeed, as I trust you will, do not let me know."

"Not—let you—know!" gasped Ellen.

"No; not at least for, say, six weeks. I am pretty sure to be questioned, and I want to be able to swear that I do not know where you are. If you promise me that you will carry out my plan, and go to more than one hospital, I can do so; and this is the only way in which I can baffle pursuit."

"Do you mean you're going to tell about my coming to-night?"

"If I am questioned, certainly. What else can I do? You see why I really wish to know nothing about you for some time. Of course, if you are in difficulties, and do not see your way, you will write to me at once. I shall at least be able to supply you with funds till you can find something to do."

Ellen's eyes filled with tears.

"Courage!" whispered Ronald. "Here

comes your fellow-traveller. Be brave and careful, and everything will go right. Well, I must be going," he added aloud, as he stood aside for the lady for York to get in. " You are so tired that I hope you will sleep well. You had better make yourself as comfortable as you can before the train starts. Good-bye."

" Good-bye," murmured Ellen, and took his proffered hand, gaining perhaps a grain of encouragement from his firm grasp.

Just at that moment a cab rattled up, and three men sprang out, one of whom rushed to the ticket-office, while another called loudly to a porter, " Here, for King's Cross ; label this—look sharp !" and Ronald, turning his head, recognised Jenkins himself.

He saw by Ellen's convulsive start that she too had recognised him. The lady for York was occupied in diving into a full hand-bag, and he hoped did not observe her agitation.

"You had much better lie down," he repeated, quietly. "I will pull up the window."

Ellen obeyed, burying her head under her shawl; and Ronald walked along to his carriage, and seating himself in the farthest corner, turned up the collar of his ulster as though he were cold, and plunged into his evening paper.

"This way, gentlemen; seats here—no time to lose," shouted the guard. There was a rush of feet along the platform, the door of Ronald's compartment was hurriedly opened, and as the train moved, a man sprang in headlong.

"By Jove, that's a shave!" exclaimed his companion outside, running along beside the train. "Luggage is in, though. Ta-ta, old chap. Good-luck to you. Give my love to——"

The name was lost as the pace quickened; but Ronald breathed again, for it was Jenkins who was left behind.

His new companion was somewhat flurried by his speed, and spent some seconds in ascertaining that his keys, his purse, and his ticket were safe. Then he heaved a sigh of relief.

“ Well, that was a near thing.”

“ It was, sir. Half a minute more would have missed it,” said a third man, the only other occupant of the carriage.

“ And a pretty penny it would have cost me if I had. I’d have broken an engagement, and had a devil of a business,” resumed the other, glancing at Ronald.

“ Indeed! You were lucky, then,” returned the first speaker, who was evidently inclined to be loquacious.

Again the new-comer looked towards Ronald, as though wishing to include him in the conversation; but though he was aware of the look, he read on at his paper, and when it was finished, settled himself as if for sleep.

The two men were soon embarked in a conversation which lasted far into the night; and from it Ronald gleaned that the riding-master's friend was an actor in one of the small theatres—that he had had a short engagement in Edinburgh, but was due in London the following night—and that he and some others, including Jenkins, had partaken of a farewell dinner, the attractions of which had nearly made him lose his train.

"You saw that fellow that came with me—red-faced chap? Queer lot that. He's got as pretty a wife as you'd wish to see, and yet he's out mostly every night of his life."

This sentence disturbed Ronald considerably; but though he listened carefully, he was unable to discover whether the speaker knew Ellen, or had only seen her. In either case, it was an additional perplexity to be faced when they should reach King's Cross.

For were she recognised, and moreover seen with him, there would be trouble in store for both of them.

Ronald began to think that he had undertaken a very difficult task, and almost wished that he had left Mrs Jenkins to her fate. It was too late now, however, for such wishes, and he turned his attention to the precautions rendered necessary at King's Cross by the untoward arrival of the actor. On an envelope which he had in his pocket he scribbled a warning to Ellen to remain quietly in the carriage on their arrival, so as to give time for her possible acquaintance to get away. At York he procured a cup of coffee, and took it to her compartment; but she was still rolled up in her shawl, and did not move.

"The lady is sleeping very soundly," said the other occupant, who was gathering her parcels preparatory to getting out. "It seems a pity to wake her."

"Thanks ; she will be the better of some coffee," replied Ronald, hoping that the sound of his voice might rouse her.

It had the desired effect. She sat up, only partially removing her shawl, and he saw that her face was deadly pale, and wet with tears. The journey from Edinburgh had been one long agony to her, for she did not know that her husband had been left behind, and fancied that in some inscrutable way he had found her out, and was accompanying her to town in order to seize her more effectively. Ronald pitied her with all his heart, and trusted that his manner might reassure her, there being no sign that the other lady would collect her goods in time for him to speak, unheard by her.

"I have brought you this coffee ; it will do you good. And here is a memorandum of some things you had better note."

Ellen took the paper and drank some

coffee eagerly, her eyes anxiously seeking to peruse Ronald's face.

"Did you see that scurry as we left Edinburgh? The passenger who was so late is in my carriage. Some actor, I think. His friends only just got him off in time."

A faint colour reappeared in Ellen's cheeks as she listened. Her greatest fear was set at rest. But would that old lady never go away, so that she could ask a question? Ah! now she was gone.

"Did he see you?" she asked in a rapid whisper.

"I don't think so. There was hardly time. Give me your cup; I must be off."

"Oh can't you stay and tell me? I'm so wretched," began Ellen. "Look at this," and she pushed back her sleeve and showed a bruise upon her arm.

"Did he do that? The brute!" replied Ronald. But here a head was thrust in

about the level of his feet, and a voice cried confusedly—"A long parcel. Yes, I'm sure it's there. Porter, do look!"

"Allow me," said Ronald; and diving under the seat, he fished out the parcel and handed it to the owner, whose profuse thanks he endeavoured to cut short by again asking Ellen for her cup.

"I'll take the cup, sir," said an officious porter.

"Do!" exclaimed Ronald, giving it to him with some halfpence, and then he hurriedly added—

"I've written you what to do. I'm very sorry for you. Try and sleep now: you're quite safe," and he leapt out, and barely regained his carriage in time.

"*You've* nearly missed it this time, sir," said the irrepressible actor.

"Yes, thanks to an old lady's brown-paper parcel," said Ronald, who did not want to attract observation by altogether

declining conversation. After another remark or two, however, he again settled himself in his corner, and was thankful to find that his companions had at last had enough of talk, and were disposed for sleep.

King's Cross in the early morning is a dismal spot; and so Ellen thought as she slowly folded up her rug, waiting with face averted from the window till Ronald should come to release her. She wished he would be quick. The porters would go on asking about luggage, and she was afraid, in spite of her veil, to turn and speak to them. She was cramped and chilled and tired, and felt more inclined to sit down and cry than anything.

She had reckoned so on this journey! Ever since Ronald's note had reached her she had built upon it, thinking that now at last she would be able to pour out her troubles to a friend who would sympathise

with her and advise her. Of course there would be people in the carriage; but if they talked in whispers it would be quite safe. Besides, strangers wouldn't know about her even if they did hear a word or two. And instead of this—instead of the kindly bright companion of whom she had dreamt—Ronald had left her with an old woman who snored so loudly that any secrets might have been talked beside her, and after York she had been quite alone. It was not at all what she had expected; and if that was what came of his being an officer, she didn't think so much of him after all.

"Now will you get out, please," said his voice at the door. "Your luggage is on a cab, and I am going in your direction, so we can go together so far."

"You have managed capitally," he said, as they drove off. Now you must summon all your courage for what is before you.

You are, as you proposed, Mrs Smith, and you are come up in order to learn nursing at a London hospital. This is all you need say about yourself. I am taking you to some quiet lodgings where I hope you may get a room. Do not lose the address I gave you."

"Oh, I may write if I'm in trouble!" cried Ellen piteously, and she laid her hand on his arm.

He took it for a moment in his own. "You know you may. Do not think me very harsh. When you have had time to recover your nerve and think matters over, you will see that I am doing what I am sure is the best and wisest thing for you. It would be poor friendship on my part if I were not in every way careful of you. At the end of the six weeks, if you have no occasion to write sooner, I think you might let me know how you are getting on."

"Thank you. Oh how good you are!" said Ellen, the tears coming again; for she recognised dimly that if her hero was not what she had expected, he was in many ways far better than any one she had as yet known.

Ronald patted her hand as though she had been a child, and the cab drew up at the door of a somewhat dingy-looking house—perhaps, however, not dingier than its surroundings.

Ronald went in, and presently returned and handed Ellen out. "You can have a room here for two nights," he said, "and you will be able to decide by that time about your remaining. Good-bye. I hope you will be successful. She is very tired," he added, turning to the landlady; "can you get her a cup of tea?"

The landlady promised she would attend to her lodger—and indeed Ellen's white face commanded pity. She was kindly

cared for, however, and it was not till she was about to settle for her two nights' stay that she found that Ronald had paid in advance for the rooms, which probably helped to account for the attention she had received.

"That's well over," thought he to himself as he drove on to his own more distant quarters. "Poor little soul! she doesn't look fit for much battling with life. I hope that ruffian won't find her—I don't well see how he can; and he will have no reason to suspect me of having a hand in it, for she said she burnt my letter." This question he had found time to ask, and Ellen in answering it believed she had spoken truly.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN EVIL TONGUE.

CAPTAIN BADGER was a man with a correspondence. How he managed it, no one could tell. He was not liked—at least by men whom people knew; he did not gain admission into really good houses, though he was familiar in some that belonged to the upper middle class,—and yet, if there was a bit of gossip, especially of the scandalous sort, at the clubs, Badger had the earliest intimation of it. He always received letters, some of which he used to pocket without opening them, so that it was jestingly surmised that he had sent them himself, in order to keep up the fiction that he had a

large circle of friends. Some of the other letters, however, must have contained kernels, for he would smile to himself knowingly over their perusal, so that his companions might remark, "Some one's come to grief—Badger's got good news."

He was never in a hurry to disclose the contents of these epistles, and hours sometimes passed before he saw the moment when his statement should carry proper effect. When that moment came he seized it quickly, and a quiet phrase or two would be launched like a rocket among the company, and left to explode with due noise and scattering of evil light. Some people alleged that he had friends among those who cater for the journals of society, and that he got his remuneration for contributions of his own, in the shape of early proof-sheets, or still earlier notes marked "private and confidential."

On a morning very soon after Ellen's

departure, Captain Badger was breakfasting in the little mess-room of Stirling Castle, opening leisurely in the intervals of his meal the notes, letters, and papers that lay beside his plate. One of the former seemed to cause him not merely satisfaction, but positive delight; and when he had ended it, he eagerly turned to a particular place in the daily paper, where, running his eye down a column, he came to a little paragraph headed, “MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.—Great excitement has been caused in Piershill and the neighbourhood by the sudden and total disappearance on Tuesday night of Mrs Jenkins, wife of the riding-master of the —th Dragoons. Mr Jenkins passed the evening in Edinburgh with some friends, and left Mrs Jenkins in the house, apparently busied with her usual avocations, about half-past five o’clock. On his return he found her absent, and the servant was unable to give any account of her. She

had gone out about seven, saying she meant to spend the evening with a friend, and would not return till late. Fears were entertained of foul play, and a careful search was made in the vicinity; but as Mrs Jenkins has hardly any friends in the neighbourhood, and as on examination it was found that some of her clothes and some money had been abstracted, it is now supposed that she left of her own free will."

Badger finished his breakfast without saying a word, but he ate with even a better appetite than usual. By-and-by he inquired whether there wasn't a road-meeting to-day some time or other? An officer present said he believed there was.

"Oh, then I'll stroll down to the club. There will be some of the people there to lunch."

As Badger had expected, the club was pretty full of gentlemen who had come in

for the meeting, and among them were of course the two he sought, and who, he knew, were never absent from business—Ernest Hardwicke and Sir Duncan Forbes. As he came into the room, the self-satisfied expression on his face struck them both as they stood at the farther end of it discussing a local measure with another county magnate, one of the most active members of the board. He made no haste to speak to them ; they were within his reach, and he could afford to select the time for his coming announcement.

By-and-by luncheons were served, and men dropped into their places—Hardwicke, Sir Duncan, and their companion choosing a table a little out of earshot of the rest of the company. Badger, who always breakfasted late *à la fourchette*, and affected to despise luncheon, wheeled an easy-chair round so that he could observe all that was going on, and join if he pleased in the

conversation at two of the tables, and took up the last number of ‘Punch.’

“Rather an absurd drawing, that one of Du Maurier’s about Doodles. Can’t see the fun of it: nobody ever made such an infernal ass of himself as that,” said one of the gentlemen nearest him, seeing him fold back the paper at a particular illustration.

“Well, you know, I’m not in that set myself,” remarked Badger, with an air which said plainly that he was thankful for his exemption; “but I know a fellow who is, and who, in fact, supplies Du Maurier with his incidents. They’re true, I assure you.”

“Do you mean to say that any one out of a lunatic asylum ever went down on his knees before a cactus in that ludicrous way, or called a teapot ‘heavenly’ in earnest?”

“Oh yes. I daresay it wasn’t precisely a cactus or a teapot, but something as absurd. You’ve no notion of the lengths

these fellows go to. I've heard stories that would make you think society—their society I mean—was gone clean mad."

"Really now. Well, I'd no idea of that," said the other, and looked with respect at Badger, who knew all the London gossip, he himself being a worthy country laird, to whom Postlethwaite, Doodles, & Co., and all the other eccentric varieties of London life, were unknown mysteries.

Badger felt that he had spent the few minutes well during which the luncheon had been disappearing at Sir Duncan's table, for he knew that he had gained increased consideration, which was to him the very breath of his nostrils. He judged it was time now to cross the room and accost his friends, otherwise they might make a move to leave. He did so therefore, dropping into an empty chair a little behind Hardwicke, but facing Sir Duncan.

"Good morning," he said. "Curious affair this in the House last night."

"Disgraceful," said Hardwicke, energetically. "I wonder how long it will last."

"Oh, not long; I know that for certain."

"Do you? How?" inquired Hardwicke in surprise, and he half turned in his chair towards the speaker.

"I am not at liberty to say precisely, but I had a letter this morning from a fellow who knows all about it, and the Government have decided to carry things with a high hand. Did you see the paragraph about the disappearance of Mrs Jenkins?" he continued, addressing Sir Duncan.

"No, I did not. Who is Mrs Jenkins?"

"The very pretty wife of Jenkins, the riding-master of the —th Dragoons," replied Badger slowly, watching to see whether the name recalled anything to Sir Duncan's memory.

Apparently it did not do so, but Hardwicke repeated it, "Jenkins,—Jenkins,—what do I know about him? Heard his name before, I'm sure."

"You have heard me mention him, I think. Well, his wife has vanished. They were afraid of some accident till they found that money and clothes have gone too."

"She's run away, then?"

"It is supposed so. By the by, our friend Bennett has left home, hasn't he? He hardly ever comes near us. I scarcely know anything of his movements, although he is in the regiment."

"He's gone up to pass for the Staff College. You know the examination is this week."

"Ah—yes," said Badger meditatively, looking down and stroking his long moustache. Then raising his head suddenly, he inquired when Ronald had gone.

"Last Tuesday night," answered Sir Duncan.

"By Jove, a curious coincidence! You remember my telling you of a scene—a tender scene, I may say—that I saw at the Waverley Station some little time ago?"

"Yes. Well?" said Hardwicke, impatiently. Sir Duncan did not speak.

"Mrs Jenkins was the lady I saw, and it was on Tuesday night she left home."

Sir Duncan rose abruptly and quitted the table. He could have struck the speaker—not for making his statement, which no doubt he believed, but for the evil smile with which he told it. Sir Duncan's temper was never proof against the sight of a man who rejoiced over the fall of a fellow-creature, whether man or woman.

Hardwicke glanced after him pityingly, and took the defence of the absent into his own hands.

"That may be," he said, as quietly as he could, "yet the facts may have nothing to do with each other."

"Oh, of course they *may* not," replied Badger, with a sneer.

Hardwicke faced him : several men were listening, and his indignation rose. "I don't for one instant believe that Bennett is in the wrong in the matter ; and it seems to me, that although you are in the same regiment, I know him better than you do. You seem rather to enjoy the idea of such an affair."

"Oh, not at all," replied Badger, with the same evil smile ; "but I think Bennett is pretty much like his neighbours—a fact some people are inclined to deny."

"Daresay he has a good deal in common with some of them," answered Hardwicke, pointedly. "I know he holds a high place in the esteem of one—Sir Duncan Forbes. By the by, Badger, I thought your regiment was noted for its *esprit de corps*," continued Hardwicke, suddenly carrying the attack into the enemy's lines.

"So it is, and always has been," replied Badger.

"Well, one wouldn't think it, from the way you talk of Bennett."

"—— bad form, I call it," said an old colonel audibly to the gentleman next him, but Badger did not appear to hear.

"I don't think myself that the introduction of rankers is likely to improve a regiment or increase *esprit de corps*. Jenkins is another ranker, an excellent riding-master, but an awful cad," said he superciliously, but rising at the same time, for he felt that his position was less satisfactory than he could have wished.

"Shame!" muttered the old colonel again in the background. But Sir Duncan here interposed : he had been standing by the door, and as the speakers' voices rose he caught the last sentences.

"There are rankers and rankers, just as there are gentlemen and gentlemen," said

he, distinctly. “As Mr Bennett’s mother was one of my wife’s most intimate friends, and as his father is an esteemed and scholarly minister of the Scotch Church, I can hardly see—and I think most of the gentlemen here will agree with me—that Mr Bennett’s presence can be damaging,—even to the 2d Highlanders. Mr Hardwicke has already stated my opinion of Bennett himself.”

There was a little murmur of applause as Sir Duncan ended. He waited a moment for Badger to reply, and the Captain’s ready tongue was hardly equal to the occasion.

“I was not aware that Bennett had so many friends. I only know him, of course, as a man promoted from the ranks—a good fellow in his way, no doubt,” said he coolly, taking up the ‘Punch’ that he had laid aside.

“Come, Hardwicke,” said Sir Duncan;

and in a wonderfully short time the room was cleared, and not one of the gentlemen, in leaving, thought it necessary to bid the Captain good morning, with the exception of the laird, who had not heard before about Doodles. He alone said a word to him as he passed, and Badger answered him affably; but as the door closed, he sprang to his feet, and throwing ‘Punch’ on the table, swore a loud oath.

He was beginning to take a personal interest in this matter of Mrs Jenkins. This morning he had not cared about it more than about a dozen other affairs of the same kind of which he had early information; but now, if he were to be bullied and slighted on that fellow Bennett’s account, he would take some trouble about it, and if he were to exert himself he might turn the tables yet, and prove all these speech-making gentry here to be in the wrong.

He took a turn or two up and down the room, and reflected; and the result of his cogitations was the despatch of an anonymous letter by the next post to Mr Jenkins, suggesting that he should search in Stirling and Tillybodle for the accomplice of his wife's flight. He wrote the note in a fine sloping hand, and with one or two faults of spelling—that would, he thought, make it appear the work of an uneducated woman; and having posted it, he returned to the Castle with a good appetite for his dinner.

“Jenkins will probably write. If he's the fellow I take him for, he'll care very little about his wife; but if he should be in a hurry, and come out to the office, Allen will send up for me—and I can easily manage him; but I must be at hand for a day or two,” thought he.

Sir Duncan did not on this occasion ask Hardwicke to accompany him home. He

did not feel as yet desirous of talking this new statement of Badger's over with him, for he was troubled as well as annoyed. He knew that however thoroughly this sort of story may be refuted, it always leaves an unpleasant trail behind it. People remember that "there was something once about So-and-so," and they forget that the something turned out to be a slanderous fiction—an empty nothing. It was certainly most unfortunate that such a coincidence of dates should have occurred; and the newspaper, into which he had looked, confirmed Badger's assertion on that head. All his friends had agreed, as they went out of the club, in condemning the man, his manner, and his talk; yet he would be sure to make himself heard—he would in all probability let the rumour find its way to Laura Hardwicke's ears, and thence it was but a little way to the manse. If Mr Bennett were to hear a whisper of it, there

would not only be sore trouble in store for his poor wife, but for Ronald himself; for his father was one who could rarely distinguish between gossip that might be true, and gossip that should at once be scouted and trodden underfoot.

Thinking of these things, kind Sir Duncan went home with a troubled mind, and debated whether he could in any way ascertain the truth, or whether it would be better to allow matters to take their own course. He had begged Hardwicke to say nothing about the affair, and he had promised to be silent; so perhaps on the whole it would be wisest to take no further notice at present, and content himself with watching for any elucidation of what was likely to be widely known as "The Piershill Mystery."

It was extraordinary, however, that in the next day or two the papers should have made so much of what in reality was

a trifling incident. As soon as it became clear that no accident had occurred, the thing might surely have been allowed to drop. But far from this being the case, there was now almost always an allusion, perhaps only a couple of lines long, to the matter.

Even Miss Forbes began to notice it, and was particularly struck with one short paragraph, which ran as follows: "A new light has been thrown on the fate of Mrs Jenkins by the discovery of an envelope, the post-mark on which attracts attention to the village of T——e, not a hundred miles from Stirling. It is believed that the pursuit will be carried on to London."

"Dear me, Duncan, where can this be? T——e! It might be Tillybodle," said Miss Forbes. "I trust no one hereabouts has had anything to do with Mrs Jenkins —it would be so very unpleasant. Just fancy such a trifle as an envelope being

of use as evidence. I hope T——e is not Tillybodle."

"I hope so too ; though even if they have found some envelope sent from Tillybodle, there may have been no harm in the letter," replied Sir Duncan.

"No, I suppose not ; but one's curiosity is excited when a thing comes near one in this way."

"Alicia ! I wish you did not jump at conclusions so readily. There are other villages not a hundred miles from Stirling, to which the phrase might equally apply,—Tillywhortle and Tyneside, for example. Besides, the whole thing may be a blunder ; and in any case, I cannot understand such a fuss being made about it. It is detestable. Why should people be so anxious to inquire into unpleasant stories ?" said Sir Duncan, tartly.

Miss Forbes looked up in extreme surprise, and said no more ; but by-and-by

she remarked softly to Muriel—"My dear, I hope your dear father is not unwell: he spoke quite shortly to me this morning, and without the slightest cause," and after this the two ladies watched Sir Duncan for the next twelve hours with eyes full of care, till they were forced to admit that there was nothing the matter.

CHAPTER XXX.

ON THE TRACK.

MEANTIME, at Piershill, Mr Jenkins had gone through a good deal of mental excitement. When he returned home about two in the morning, in a not very clear-headed condition, he accepted the servant's statement with surprise and some annoyance, but without any doubts, and tumbled into bed to sleep off the effects of his evening.

Next morning, however, when he awoke and found his wife had not returned, he became seriously angry. He had intended to give her a "rowing," as he termed it, for venturing out at all without his permission, especially as he had no idea where

she could have gone ; but that she should stay out and leave him to dress and breakfast without the many attentions which he always expected, was an unheard-of crime.

Still, it did not occur to him that she could have left him. She had been careful, even when her temper flashed up under repeated insults, never to breathe a word that should lead him to suspect her of such an intention ; and he did not give her credit for force of character to form, or even courage to carry out, any connected scheme. Very possibly, had Ronald not been there to assist her, Ellen would have justified his opinion of her weakness.

By the time he had breakfasted on Wednesday, Jenkins grew seriously uneasy, and consulted the adjutant, and by his advice the police. Provincial police are not celebrated for speed or great detective power, and the rest of the morning and part of that afternoon were consumed in

a search through all the dimly lighted and lonely roads in the vicinity. Then at last it occurred to a genius in the force that the information furnished by Mr Jenkins might be defective, and that the lady might have intended to run away. He put the question to Jenkins delicately, as one feeling his way, and anxious not to give needless offence.

“Run away!” repeated Jenkins, in extreme amazement; “oh, she’d never manage that. And where could she go? She knew no more than a baby about places.”

“Has she taken any money with her, or clothes? It would be advisable to make a careful inspection,” said the policeman. Decidedly he was an acquisition to the corps.

“By Jingo, I never thought of that! What a blockhead I was not to look!” quoth Jenkins, understanding the situation rightly. And he went with all speed to

his wife's room, and hastily flung open the door of a wardrobe and pulled out the drawers, turning her poor little garments on to the floor.

Then he was at fault again. He didn't know what she had, seldom noticed or remembered her dresses, and could not in the least tell whether things were missing or not. Certainly, if she had taken anything, she had left what seemed to his masculine eyes a good deal behind her. He bethought him of the servant, and summoned her hastily.

"Here, Janet—has the missis taken any of her clothes away? I want to know,—seems to me she's left the whole of her trash here," said he, garnishing his words, as usual, with expletives in plenty.

The woman glanced over the heaps on the floor, and then into the wardrobe, and one rapid survey satisfied her.

"My! Sir, there's an awfu' lot o' things

awa'. Whaur's her black-silk goun, and her best bonnet?"

"She may have gone out in them," said Jenkins.

"Na, she didna. I saw her, and she had her auld brown wincey on, that I was to have had come term-day," said Janet, indignantly. "There's her Indian shawl too, that she's prood o', — that's awa, and a wheen o' her white claes, and buits tae. My word! she's gotten plenty wi' her for ae nicht's veesit," she concluded, with a sour smile.

"Her old gown on, you say, and her things taken? Oho, my lady!" muttered Jenkins, "we'll see now how the money stands."

He went to the little Indian box — a birthday gift from her father — in which Ellen had been wont to keep the sums he gave her for the house expenses. It was locked (Ellen's tears had fallen on its

painted lid as she turned the key in it for the last time, after emptying it of its contents). With a knife and the poker Jenkins broke it open, and examined its divisions hurriedly.

"Every penny gone, and she's got near twenty-four hours' start of me," he cried, and flung the broken box into the grate, and hastened down to the sitting-room, where the adjutant and colonel had now joined the policeman.

"We're all on the wrong tack," said he, an angry flush burning on his sullen face, "and that pale-faced little chit has outwitted me. She's taken her best clothes, and every penny she could lay her hands on. She's run away, and hasn't left a single thing to trace her by."

The two officers endeavoured to say what was fitting under the circumstances; but though Jenkins accepted their condolences, and tried to look as though he believed

them, he guessed truly enough the purport of their thoughts, and it was this more than anything that stirred his anger. When the next proceedings had been discussed, and such advice as policeman "A" could offer had been tendered and received, Jenkins was left alone to think over the state of affairs, and come if possible to some decision.

"Well done, Mrs Jenkins!" exclaimed the adjutant, the moment they were outside the house.

"Serve him right, the scoundrel," added the colonel; "though I wouldn't have expected it of her—would you?"

"No; I confess I didn't give her credit for so much pluck, and that's where the shoe will pinch Jenkins. To have tyrannised over the poor little soul, and then to be done so neatly. It's the best thing I've heard for a long time."

"It is, if she's gone alone," returned the colonel.

"Whew!" The adjutant paused a minute, and then said slowly, "Well, I believe she has. She was a good little woman in her way."

"Yes, I'm inclined to think so too."

Where to begin his search, Jenkins had not the remotest idea. He clung to the notion that Ellen was in Edinburgh—that she would never have been clever enough to leave it; and there seemed to be reason on his side when he pointed out that she could not have had two pounds in her possession. It seemed in the highest degree improbable that she would expend her only funds in travelling any distance. She might have pawned her clothes. This was the next suggestion; and the pawnshops were searched and watched, but neither Indian shawl nor any other article of apparel could be traced up to Wednesday night.

Rewards were next offered, for which two claimants appeared, who threw the first

gleam of light on the proceedings. One was a boy, the son of the widow at whose shop Ellen had gradually collected her clothes. It was he who had carried her little box and plaid until they met an empty cab. He was quite clear about his information as far as it went ; but after all, it did not amount to much. There was a temporary shed near the shop, used by workmen engaged in building ; and it was to this place that Mrs Jenkins had taken him on Tuesday evening, the box being hidden there. She carried a bag herself : he couldn't say of what kind or colour—she kept it under her cloak. She got into a cab in Waterloo Place, and he did not know what address she had given to the driver. He could not say how the box was conveyed to the shed, nor did a close examination elicit anything more.

It did not transpire that his mother had carried the box there at a prearranged hour

while he was gone on an errand, nor that he subsequently received a sound beating for having dared to say a word about that night's proceedings. The widow at least was a stanch friend of Mrs Jenkins.

The cabman next came forward, and, to the surprise of every one, declared that he remembered the fare in question perfectly well, and that he had driven her to Waverley Station.

Among the porters the inquiry made at first no progress. They had no recollection of a lady such as Jenkins distinctly described his wife to be ; and neither he nor Janet knew that two or three little changes had been made in her dress between the time of saying that she was going out and her reaching the station. A brilliant crimson rose, for instance, was dropped out of her bonnet, a veil was put on, and an old faded cape taken out of her bag and fastened round her shoulders above the

pretty jacket which Janet swore she had on.

At last a porter was found who, though he positively refused to swear to anything, said he was pretty sure that a lady, very small, and with a box such as was described to him, had left on the Tuesday night for London or York,—he rather thought it was York. One other lady was with her in the compartment, bound certainly for London.

That Ellen could have gone to London, paying away almost her entire money for her ticket, seemed preposterous ; and though he racked his brain to find any one who could have lent her a larger sum, or could have taken her away, Jenkins had not as yet thought of a single name that he could mention with the slightest show of probability : not only had Ellen made no friends, but she had not even shown any desire for friendship with any man of his acquaintance. The police at York were communi-

cated with by wire ; and it was arranged that when the through conductor of the Tuesday night train, who was now in London, should return on Thursday, he should meet Jenkins at once.

The riding-master's wits, rendered none the clearer by his usual habits, had not as yet reverted to the incident of Ronald's visit, nor had a suspicion of his intervention occurred to him ; but as he returned home from his interview with the station authorities, he made a step in the right direction, for he remembered that he himself had gone to the night-mail on Tuesday night with his friend—good heavens ! could it be that Brown—the fellow who had dined with him—had a hand in the matter ? On second thoughts he banished this idea. Brown was an actor, a jovial careless fellow, very unlikely to have cash to spare ; and besides, so far as Jenkins could tell, he had only once seen Ellen for about five

minutes. No, that notion was absurd, and he must wait and see the guard.

Next morning brought him an anonymous letter, which ran thus : "Search for letters from Tillybodle, and if you find or need any further clue, write to 'Z.,' care of J. Allen, office of 'The Weekly Chit-Chat,' Stirling.—A Well-wisher."

Now 'The Weekly Chit-Chat' was a sort of Scottish 'World,' and Allen was the name of a *quondam* friend of Badger's, once, in long vanished years, a gentleman, but now a scampish clever clerk, one of those persons whom Badger occasionally mentioned as "fellows in the literary circles."

"Tillybodle?" thought Jenkins—"where the deuce is that? And what had she to do with it? Never heard of the place in my life. However, I'll look again. Wonder who wrote this?—a woman, I'll be bound."

Once more he went up to his wife's room,

and looking round it, wondered if he had left any possible hiding-place unsearched. He had broken open her desk—had turned out every drawer and every box ; and as he stood thinking, he moved aimlessly two or three articles that lay on the table—a piece of work, an old account-book, the last yellow novel that she had been reading. As he lifted the latter, something caught his eye—an envelope stuck in to mark a place. With eager attention he examined it : it was addressed in a bold hand, not to the barracks, but to the little shop in the neighbourhood from which the boy came who carried Ellen's box, and it bore the post-marks Stirling and Tillybodle.

“ Then my well - wisher was right, after all ! I'll write to her at once—of course it's a woman—and find out what she knows ; or, by Jove, I'll go and see her ! that'll be best. And so those people at the shop were in it too. I thought that old woman was up

to mischief by the way she spoke to me. Well, it's taking a long time, but I'll be even with them all yet. Now I'll go and see my friend the guard."

The guard, alert and observant, was quite ready with conclusive evidence. The porter was wrong ; the lady with the little box went to London, the other one to York—the gentleman was in the smoking-carriage.

"The gentleman ! Then there was one, after all !" ejaculated Jenkins. "What was he like ? Short and dark ? Did he come late—very late ?"

"No, no, I remember him too : I got him into the same carriage as the other one. He was tall, and uncommon good-looking, fairish moustache and brown hair—officer, I should think. He was very careful of the lady, saw her into her compartment, took her coffee at York, and they went away together from King's Cross. He had a light-brown ulster on."

"An ulster,—fair moustache,—brown hair,"—surely Jenkins had seen some one—where was it? —! he remembered now. As he hurried his friend Brown into the train, he saw a face he thought he knew, but he could not put a name upon it—that was the man. "Was he in the far corner of the carriage?" he asked.

"Yes, and seemed very chilly; had his collar up, though the night was warm."

"Ah!" Jenkins knew all about it now, and he stamped with rage as it flashed upon him that he had seen that face once in his own parlour, and that it was the face of a man he hated—Ronald Bennett.

A train was just starting for Stirling, and he jumped into it, and during the journey had time to arrange his ideas and digest the discovery he had made,—perhaps the only one that could have thoroughly mortified his pride. In the early days of their acquaintanceship his wife had made no

secret of her admiration for Sergeant Bennett, and had openly praised his talents, his looks, his manner, in the hope of raising a barrier between herself and her unwelcome suitor, whose sensual countenance and rough voice were so strong a contrast to those of her hero of the 2d. When again, and yet again, the papers had mentioned his gallantry in the field, she did not, we may be sure, think less of him than before ; and when at last he received his commission, her pretty cheeks flushed, and her bright eyes glistened with pride.

But she realised, almost before her father in forcible language pointed out to her, that her hero had now stepped altogether into a different world from hers, and that she might set aside for ever any girlish dream of a devotion that should in time soften his heart. Jenkins, it was true, had also risen from the ranks, but then he "was different," as Sergeant - Major Smith shrewdly re-

marked. “ He’s got his commission, and does his work well, but he belongs more to us than to the officers’ mess. Now Bennett will never marry a woman of our class, Ellen; I’m as certain of that as I stand here. You take Jenkins, like a sensible girl ; you’ll be an officer’s wife after all, and if you and Bennett ever meet, he’ll see you had more spirit than to sit whining about him.”

Perhaps this last argument told upon the girl ; and thus it came about that, with tears and lamentations, and after repeated lectures and arguments, she submitted to her martyrdom, and married red-faced Tom Jenkins.

He, on his part, thought only of her beauty, and did not understand nor care two straws for her romance. He considered her a little fool, like all girls ; and if after his marriage he gave a thought to the subject of her fancy, it was because its depth and tenacity puzzled him, and it was annoy-

ing to find in a woman who belonged to him, anything he could not completely fathom. All that he could do was to repress any evidence of the fact that her heart was not entirely his, and this he did with a strong hand. On the first occasion when he indulged in a fit of morose ill-temper, Ellen rashly alluded to Sergeant—she meant to say Mr Bennett's invariable politeness towards women. Then her husband turned on her savagely, and swore that if she ever breathed that fellow's name again he would beat her ; and Ellen, terrified and startled, obeyed, and hated him all the more.

He had believed that she did not anticipate Ronald's visit at Piershill. Her surprise was evidently genuine when he appeared, and Jenkins therefore contented himself with warning her not to admit him again. Yet now, before his very eyes, they had gone away together ; and he

hardly knew how to contain himself, as he reflected that Ronald must have seen him at the train, and must have laughed at him in his sleeve. How he cursed that last song and toast that had delayed him after dinner! Had he been in good time he must have seen Ellen, and could have dragged her out of the carriage, and put her and Bennett to open shame; and as he thought over these things, under cover of a pipe and newspaper in the smoking-carriage, he underwent what was probably the only species of punishment for his sins that could have wounded or stung him.

Arrived in Stirling, he hastened to the ‘Chit-Chat’ office and inquired for Mr Allen. To him he disclosed his errand — saying that he wished to see, as soon as possible, the person who was referred to as “Z.”

Mr Allen hesitated, and appeared even perplexed, but after a moment said he

could not himself introduce him to "Z.," but that if the visitor would give him his card and state his errand, he would communicate it to "Z." at once.

"Does she live far off, then?" asked Jenkins.

"She?—oh, 'Z.'? Not very far," replied Allen, with a slight smile; and he then provided Jenkins with some newspapers and left him to himself.

After some delay the door opened and Captain Badger appeared, and without introducing himself by name, bowed to the astonished Jenkins, and said that he came on behalf of his correspondent "Z.," who, though anxious to assist him, was unwilling to interfere personally.

"I understand—a lady, of course, who would rather keep in the background—eh?"

"I have no doubt you understand," replied Badger blandly, and at once pro-

ceeded to arrange a plan of campaign, to which Mr Jenkins readily agreed.

The interview took some time ; for Jenkins insisted on travelling again and again over the same ground, although Badger professed himself thoroughly able to comprehend and sympathise with him.

“ If she'd gone off alone, because—well, because she's tired of me—I couldn't say much, except that our feelings were mutual on that subject. If she'd gone off with any other fellow but that—well, he'd be welcome to her, for then I should get a divorce easy ; but I'm not going to give up the chase as it is. Whatever happens, I'll make him pay for his —— interference. Who asked him to come into my home, sir, and fill that foolish woman's head with his fine fancies ? I'll not stand it, sir, and that I tell you ! ” exclaimed Jenkins, in the tone of an injured man. It pleased him to take that line with this

stranger, who could not know that if he was injured, he was also both profligate and cruel.

Again Captain Badger assured the speaker of his entire sympathy, and said that he also expressed that of the unknown correspondent.

“ You think it would be a real good move, then, to go out to this place ? ” said Jenkins.

“ I do — nothing like going to headquarters. I’ll write you the address in case you should forget it ; ” and Badger, on a scrap of paper, wrote in his own round broad hand—“ The Rev. J. Bennett, The Manse, Tillybodle.”

Jenkins scrutinised the paper, and Badger scrutinised Jenkins. Certainly the man was not quick-witted ; for the difference of the handwriting evidently satisfied any lurking doubt that he may have felt as to whether his new acquaintance and “ Z.”

were the same person. He made one effort to ascertain Badger's name, but it was easily foiled. "Quite unnecessary to mention names, Mr Jenkins. If you wish to communicate again, the same address will find 'Z.' and through 'Z.' will find me."

As they left the office, Jenkins remarked, "I am much obliged to you, sir, for your assistance, and to—the lady. May I ask if 'Z.' is personally acquainted with Bennett?"

"Oh yes—has known him for years very well," returned Badger, with his mysterious smile, and Jenkins went away confirmed in an opinion that he had already formed.

He ordered a dogcart at one of the inns, and while it was being got ready, had luncheon—cold beef and beer, with a glass of brandy to finish. Then he drove away, hurrying, as much as the temper of the driver or the speed of the horse would allow, to Tillybodle.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TRIAL AND TRUST.

IT was well on in the afternoon when he arrived at Tillybodle, and drew up at the door of the little manse. It was a lovely summer's day : the roses, heavy with their own richness, drooped against the porch ; the bees dived and hummed in the luscious honeysuckle ; the row of tall sunflowers that screened off the kitchen-garden were a blaze of gold ; and the whole spot seemed to be given up to peace and a delicious and languid repose.

Mrs Bennett had been reading, but the book had slipped gradually to her knee, and she nodded drowsily—lulled by the

warmth, the sweet scents, and dreamy sounds, of that pleasant afternoon. She was aroused by the entrance of Nancy with a card, which she took, and replaced the spectacles she had pushed up on her forehead, in order to read it. "A friend of Mr Ronald's, no doubt. Show him in, Nancy, and take this card to the minister; and, Nancy, get tea a little earlier."

These directions given, she rose, laying aside her book, a little pleased that she should be receiving a friend of her son's. Unconsciously, her cordiality lessened by a shade as the visitor entered. His appearance was quite unlike anything in her experience, and she hardly restrained a movement of surprise.

Jenkins bowed awkwardly. He had been nursing his wrath as he came along, and was fully prepared to pour it forth in rough and ready fashion—having gathered an impression from Badger's talk that

he was coming to a sort of cottage where the inmates would soon be easily cowed by a judicious mixture of indignation and swagger. The reality rather took him aback. He could see, in the moment of entering, that the room was handsomely furnished, and filled with knick-knacks and china, of the value of which he knew nothing, but which he recognised as the sort of things he saw in first-class shop-windows, or a few of them in the best drawing-rooms he had ever seen—those of the wives of the officers in the —th. The minister's wife herself, too—tall and stately, with a quiet air of dignity about her—awed him, and for an instant he wished himself back at Piershill ; but again the thought of his wrongs and of that handsome face of Ronald's fired his courage.

All this shot through his mind between the doorway and the arm-chair to which his hostess motioned him. As he took it,

he glanced at her, and recognised the same features, the same “haughty” look, that had roused his ire in her son; and in that moment he recovered his ground, and prepared for his attack.

“A friend of my son’s, I presume?” said Mrs Bennett, also seating herself.

“No, madam. Never saw him but once—twice, I should say—but expect to see him before long.”

“Are you too going to the college, then?”

“I am going to see him wherever he may be,” replied Jenkins, as the door again opened, and the minister entered.

His eye was less quick than his wife’s, and he shook hands with his visitor, who rather submitted to than returned the civility.

“Glad you’re at home, sir,” began Jenkins. “You ought to be made aware of my business. Your son, Bennett of the 2d, left home last Tuesday, I believe?”

"He did," replied the minister, while Mrs Bennett sat watching the stranger with a keen gaze.

"So did my wife, sir," said Jenkins, emphatically.

"Ah,—yes,—indeed?" The minister was puzzled.

"You don't understand? I'm Jenkins, sir, about whose troubles there have been paragraphs in the papers; mysterious disappearance from Piershill — haven't you read it?"

"No; I never read things of that kind," said Bennett.

"I saw something,—she was missing; I hope there was no accident," said Mrs Bennett.

"Accident, ma'am! No, nothing of the sort. She was an old flame of your son's, had some romantic fancy for him, but married me in the end. Your son came to see her in her own home a while back,

and they planned an elopement ; he's taken her away. I can prove that they went off on Tuesday night to London."

" That's a lie ! "

It was Mrs Bennett who spoke, quite calmly and distinctly, standing erect, with a hand, for support perhaps, on the mantelpiece.

The minister sat speechless, cowering in his chair.

" A lie, is it ?—a lie ? " shouted Jenkins, furiously. " It's lucky that you said that, not the minister, or I'd make him eat his words ! One can't strike a woman——"

" Pardon me, sir—if I am not mistaken, *you* sometimes do. I know you now ; you are the—person—whose wife appealed to my son for help, and he would have asked her to come here if his father would have consented. You remember, James ? " she said, turning to her husband, who bowed his head. " You strike your wife, sir, and

take her into evil company, and bring abandoned women into her very house. I think she was perfectly right to leave you ; but that my son would harm her—I say again, it is a lie ! ”

The red face of Jenkins was livid with rage when Mrs Bennett ended, but he broke into a loud forced laugh.

“ And you believe that she’s gone off with him quite innocently, like the Babes in the Wood—eh ? What do you think of that ? ” and he thrust the envelope before her eyes.

“ It is my son’s writing. I am aware that he wrote to your wife in answer to her appeal.”

“ Oh, you are, are you ? Upon my word, I’ll have to bring you in as an accessory before the fact. Oh, I’m going to push it. I’m going up to see your son ; perhaps I shall find him taking care of Ellen still. I’ll get another witness too—one, I fancy,

he won't care to face—one who sent a gentleman to see me and give me your address—a lady she is; I haven't her name yet, but I'll get it. She's not far from this, and has known him very well for years—very well indeed—and she wants him brought to justice. It was, thanks to an anonymous letter from her, that I found that envelope. I'll have her in the witness-box too, and pretty stories we shall hear. Where is he? I want his address."

For a moment Mrs Bennett was mute, hesitating as to the wisdom of replying; but the voice of the minister, who had neither moved nor spoken till now, filled the pause.

"My son is at the Staff College, sir, for his examination at present. Go and find him, and whatever fault he has committed, I pray that justice may be done."

Mrs Bennett looked round with a momentary flash of scorn; then she turned to

Jenkins with the same dignified bearing as before.

"So do I, sir. I hope from the bottom of my heart that justice may be done upon *all* offenders. I wish you good morning."

She pointed to the door with an air of command that even Jenkins could not, much as he wished it, disobey; and as Nancy entered, carrying the tray with the bright tea-equipage, he took up his hat and slunk out.

"Mercy preserve us!" ejaculated Nancy; but the mistress, still standing, motioned to her too to withdraw—"Take it away," she whispered, and Nancy withdrew trembling, and the door closed.

The bees were flying homewards, and the birds twittering their soft good-nights; the sun was going down, and the evening perfumes floated in at the open window; the sky grew golden, rosy, pale,—and yet those two sat in unbroken silence, unable to

breathe the thoughts that troubled their aching hearts.

It was on the morning after this interview that the paragraph appeared which had stirred the curiosity of Miss Forbes,—the paragraph relating to the envelope and the village of T——e. Sir Duncan, secretly disquieted on the subject, walked over to the manse in the course of the morning, and was greeted by Nancy with an eagerness that showed how deeply she was moved.

“Eh, Sir Duncan ! I’m thankfu’ you’ve come. I’d amaist taken the liberty o’ sendin’ you word. There was an ill-lookin’ man here yesterday, and the minister and the mistress are jist as though their vera hearts were broke. What is’t, Sir Duncan ? There maun be something awfu’ gane wrang.”

Sir Duncan shook his head. “I’m afraid something is wrong, Nancy, but I hope it will not turn out so bad as they think.”

"Is't Mr Ronald ?" asked the old servant in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Eh, my puir mistress!" muttered she, wringing her hands as she preceded Sir Duncan along the little hall.

Mrs Bennett rose as he came in, and holding out her hands, uttered almost a cry. "Oh, Sir Duncan!—my boy, my boy, how can we clear his good name?" and she burst into tears.

"My dear old friend, take comfort. Sit down and tell me all about it. I am confident, however black things may look, Ronald has done no wrong."

"Ah, that is like you! That is cheering to hear. James, come in—come and hear what our old friend says of our boy," she exclaimed as Bennett entered.

The minister did not wait to listen: he was a man as slow to decide in an emergency, as he was tenacious in clinging to

his decisions. He had had time now to reflect, and he had gauged and wrestled with his feelings, and fathomed their intensity.

“ Marion is grieved, Sir Duncan, because I cannot go with her in her complete certainty that Ronald is blameless in this matter. He is young, and may have been tempted, may have fallen, like the rest of us. Why not? He has no peculiar armour, no special safeguard about him.”

Mrs Bennett could have answered that he had the safeguard of his love for a noble woman, but Sir Duncan’s presence restrained her.

“ He may have sinned ; and if he has, I say to you as I said to that—that ruffian, —I pray that justice may be done. If I spoke against Ronald yesterday, it was because I know the extent of my own weakness. God only can tell how proud I have grown of that boy.”

The minister covered his face with his hands, and Sir Duncan's voice, when he replied, was husky.

"I respect you for your unflinching love of right, Bennett, even though I agree with your wife in her belief. I cannot give a distinct reason for my feeling, and yet I would stake my own honour on Ronald's at this moment."

Bennett wrung him by the hand. "You are a stanch friend, Sir Duncan, and I pray, I pray that you may be right."

"Now you must tell me exactly what passed," said he, "for I am only in possession of rumours as yet."

The tale was soon told; but when the mysterious "Z." was mentioned, Mrs Bennett looked at Sir Duncan, and saw that his expression was perplexed and surprised.

"Who can 'Z.' be?" was his first question.

"Who indeed? There is no lady—I may say no woman anywhere near here who has known Ronald well,—except Muriel."

"So I should have said. This is the strangest part of the whole affair. We must try to solve it, for it will not do to sit down idly and let Mr Jenkins have the field to himself."

"You think not? What do you advise, then?" said Mrs Bennett, eagerly.

"Well, I should like to think it over. Will you note down precisely what passed between you and Ronald about Mrs Jenkins?"

"Yes, I remember it all perfectly."

"And you will both, I suppose, write to him to-day?"

"Yes," from both parents.

"I will do the same; and if anything occurs to me that we can do, I will go in to my lawyer's in Edinburgh at once. Meantime keep up your spirits if you can."

I should very much like to find out who ‘Z.’ is.”

As Sir Duncan walked home he meditated on this last question, and determined to drive over to Broomieknowe after luncheon and see Hardwicke. He and Ronald had been much together, and he might be able to throw some light upon the mystery. That “Z.” must be dishonourable and treacherous—might even be a tool in designing hands—was, Sir Duncan thought, obvious, from the fact of her condescending to write an anonymous letter. Before setting out, he told his sister and daughter of the misfortune that had overtaken their friends, and of his own belief in Ronald’s innocence.

“But then, why did he go away with her?” said Miss Forbes. “Appearances are very much against him, don’t you think so? What a horrid affair!”

“Perhaps they are. But his friends can

surely trust him a little. Don't you agree with me, Muriel?"

"I am glad that you can do so, papa," she replied, with such evident reserve that her father gazed at her in amazement.

"Why, Muriel! do you mean to say that you suspect him?" he inquired.

"I cannot go as far as that, papa, but I am not quite satisfied about him; and it does seem to me that poor Mr Jenkins deserves some pity."

"Well, my dear, I can only say, if the account I heard of him to-day is true, horsewhipping is too good for him," replied Sir Duncan, with ineffable disgust. Perhaps the only crime for which he was never known to find an excuse, and in judging which he was merciless, was the ill-usage of a woman.

"You will go and see Mrs Bennett this afternoon, will you not?" continued he, addressing his daughter.

"Yes, though I fear I shall be a poor comforter," she replied, "for I agree with Mr Bennett—if he has sinned, he should be brought to justice."

Sir Duncan glanced at her as she uttered these words; it was an unfortunate coincidence that it was just the phrase that Jenkins had attributed to "Z." He hoped that Mrs Bennett might not make the same remark, for in her nervous state it might put strange fancies into her head. He said nothing, however, but drove off after lunch to Broomieknowe, and asked to see Hardwicke alone. The young man heard his story with unfeigned regret, and at its conclusion exclaimed, as he himself had done—

"But who on earth is 'Z.'?"

"I haven't an idea; but we must find out, although on principle I dislike everything in the way of secret inquiries."

"One must fight a Jenkins and a 'Z.' with

their own weapons, however," said Hardwicke. "Shall I go and call upon him, and represent myself as an emissary from his unknown correspondent?"

Sir Duncan smiled. "You would not do it well, I fear. Seriously, however, I shall get a note from Mrs Bennett of all that passed, and go in to a lawyer I know—a sharp fellow,—and see what he advises. To tell the truth, I came here on the chance of your knowing of any friend of Ronald's of whom he might not have spoken to me."

"I never heard him speak of a soul hereabouts that I did not know myself; and none of them, as you are well aware, have been his friends for years, as 'Z.' is represented to have been."

"I cannot make it out," repeated Sir Duncan.

There was a pause. The two gentlemen were sitting by Hardwicke's writing-table

in the library, and through the open window they looked across the park to the trout-stream where Ronald had passed so many pleasant hours.

“The question seems to me to be, who is there who dislikes Bennett sufficiently to wish to do him an ill turn ?” said Hardwicke.

“And I should have said he hadn’t an enemy,” replied Sir Duncan.

Again Hardwicke paused, and as his eyes wandered down to the stream, a smile crossed his face.

“What is it ?” asked Sir Duncan, observing the look.

“An idea has just occurred to me ; but it seems so absurd, that I think, with your leave, I will say nothing at present. Must think it over. Hope I may be right,” answered Hardwicke, and Sir Duncan knew by the jerky sentences that he was deeply interested.

"I trust you may be, if you think there's anything in it. Can you let me know tomorrow? Come over to luncheon if you can, after church."

"I will. By Jove, if I *am* right, there will be a row!"

With this mysterious conclusion, Sir Duncan was forced to be satisfied, and he returned home, excusing himself from seeing Laura, as he had letters to write before the post-hour.

Hardwicke went into the drawing-room, where she was sitting, deep in the perusal of Whyte Melville's last book.

"Laura," said he, abruptly, "do you know anybody who hates Ronald Bennett, and would do him an ill turn if he could?"

"Yes; Captain Badger, of course. Is that a riddle?" replied Laura, promptly.

"There *is* a riddle, and you've answered it as I've done. If we're right—by Jove, if we're right!" exclaimed Hardwicke, push-

ing one or two chairs aside as he walked up and down the room.

"Well, if we are—what in the world has come to you, Ernest?"

"Can't tell you yet, my dear. Bennett's in a row. There's some trickery, and I'm on the scent of—vermin, we will say, I couldn't call it game. You'll hear about it by-and-by."

"I'll hear about it directly, if you please," cried Laura, springing up and tossing Whyte Melville on to a table. Nor was she disappointed; for with her arm linked in his, and pacing up and down beside him, she soon persuaded her brother to tell her the whole story.

Her verdict was decisive, and it was in favour of Ronald, although she, too, confessed that she pitied Jenkins a little; but then neither she nor Muriel quite understood the nature of his crimes. It was a great shock to her to find that she had

entertained in her house a man who could be suspected of such a mean action as her brother attributed to Badger, and in her usual impetuous fashion she now became a keen partisan of Ronald's. In defending him, she seemed to herself to be apologising for her previous toleration of a foe whom she now heartily despised.

For the first time in her life, Muriel's visit to the manse on that Friday afternoon was not productive of pleasure to herself or to her friend. Mrs Bennett felt, before a dozen words had been uttered, that the sympathy she expressed was for her, not for Ronald, and a few shrewd questions elicited from her a confession of her misgivings. She spoke shortly, almost defiantly, and to Mrs Bennett's exclamations of pain and resentment, could answer nothing except that she was unable to resist her impressions. They were founded, she admitted, on trifles, but were none the less clear; and, moreover,

there was the undeniable fact that he had said he did not know where any of his friends were, when Mrs Jenkins must actually have been in correspondence with him at the time. Even poor Mrs Bennett found it difficult to account for this apparent discrepancy ; but she clung to her original belief none the less strongly, and maintained that at least no judgment should be passed upon him till he had been heard in his own defence. He could doubtless explain everything.

“I hope he may. I do not wish to judge him, but I cannot be blind and deaf to all evidence,” replied Muriel, more stiffly than she had ever spoken to mamsie before. “If he has sinned, let justice be done.”

“Muriel !” exclaimed Mrs Bennett, rising in her excitement, “those were the very words that Mr Jenkins used, that he had heard in some way from a lady near here who had known my boy for years ! It is

not possible that you have had anything to do with it! Have you spoken to any one heedlessly, who can have made use of your words? Don't look at me like that,—speak!"

"You ask me if *I—I*—have had anything to do with it—with an anonymous letter?" asked Muriel, slowly.

"I ask you if you have influenced any one who could thoughtlessly have done such a thing. I don't accuse you of being 'Z.' yourself," said Mrs Bennett.

"I think if you imagine I could have anything, however indirectly, to do with such a matter, I had better go home," said Muriel, trembling, and she walked quickly out of the house.

When Sir Duncan heard of this further mischance, he almost felt that there was a fatality about Ronald's life which always brought trouble upon him, even when his prospects seemed at their brightest.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRUTH WINS.

THE post was delivered early at Inverallan on Sunday by a private messenger, and included a copy of 'Chit-Chat,' which was published on Saturday afternoon. It was Miss Forbes who took it in. Sir Duncan disliked its tone, and his daughter did not care about it; but aunt Alicia, though she admitted the vulgarity of certain of its articles, found it an excellent gazette of fashionable news, and was not averse to the columns which were headed "This Week's Chat." Under this title were included notices of marriages to be, and marriages which the 'Chit-Chat' said were

to be; gossip from the clubs; and little paragraphs full of dashes and initials, in which an expectant public was tantalised with mysterious allusions to the next edifying scandal.

In the number delivered on this particular Sunday, a heading in large type caught Miss Alicia's eye as she sat in a low sloping chair, with her feet on a soft footstool, and a table at her elbow on which lay a scent-bottle, a few books adapted for the day, and her letters. She was not going to church, for she did not feel well, and she intended to read a sermon when the others left, but in the meantime she must just take a glance at her favourite paper. As she read the paragraph with the large letters, she sat forward in her chair, and when she had ended she jumped up, every bracelet and chain about her tinkling, and ran to the door, calling her brother.

"What is the matter?" he exclaimed, hurrying towards her from the dining-room, where he was reading his letters.

"My dear Duncan! do come and look at 'Chit-Chat,'—the most disgraceful paragraph,—oh, you should bring an action for libel,—it's dreadful, dreadful!" cried she, excitedly.

Sir Duncan strode into the drawing-room and took up the paper. This was what he read there:—

"ELOPEMENT AND SINGULAR REVELATIONS.

"Light has at last penetrated the darkness that enveloped Mrs Jenkins in her flight from Piershill. A hint given by an anonymous writer occasioned a careful search, and an envelope was found among her property bearing the post-mark of Tillybodle. The writing was identified as that of a newly-made officer, whose exploits

have attracted some attention ; probably he did not expect this last one to be known. He has eloped with Mrs Jenkins to London, where search is being made for her. The most singular part of the story is, that ‘Z.’ the anonymous writer, is believed on excellent authority to be a lady, from childhood an intimate friend of both the officer and his family, and well known in the neighbourhood of Tillybodle by her position and her personal merits.”

“ What do you think of your pet paper now, Alicia ? ” asked her brother.

“ It is horrible ! What will you do ? ”

“ Do ! nothing. No name or initial is given. I could not have a man up for writing that paragraph ; and if I could, I would rather submit to a libel than tarnish my name by going into court with such a foe. But,” he added, somewhat sternly, “ perhaps you will see now that I have

grounds for saying that that paper ought never to be seen on a lady's table."

"I'll have nothing more to do with it; I'll stop it at once," said Miss Forbes, quite humbly.

"That we will see about. It will not do to show you are hurt, or they'll put *you* in next," replied Sir Duncan, grimly. "This will be a fresh blow to the Bennetts, though, if they see it copied into any other paper. Of course they don't subscribe to that thing."

When Hardwicke arrived after church, the expression of his face was confident and keen. He talked gaily to the ladies during lunch, passing over, with merely a word or two of sympathy, the topic of Ronald's troubles; but when he accompanied Sir Duncan to the library, his demeanour changed.

"I saw that atrocious paper on your table. Some one has sent it to us," he said.

"I am confirmed by it in the guess I made yesterday."

"Are you? My dear fellow, what is it?"

"That 'Z.' is Badger himself. I know he has dealings with 'Chit-Chat,' for I've seen him leaving the office. It isn't likely that Jenkins would have stopped in Stirling to insert that abominable paragraph, even if he knew enough of Bennett's friendships; he'd have missed his train to Edinburgh. Then some one in Stirling did it, or how was it printed on Saturday morning—tell me that?" said Hardwicke, triumphantly.

"Upon my honour, I hardly thought the man could have been so shabby; but I believe you're right. Now what is to be done?"

A long consultation ensued, the result of which need not be told in detail, since its execution failed.

Sir Duncan indeed went to his friend the lawyer on the following day, arriving in

Edinburgh at an hour that astonished the office, and made it appear that his business was of a very pressing nature. The lawyer, after due discussion, drove off to Piershill, but was forced to return with the disappointing information that he had found the bird flown. Mr Jenkins had gone to London on Sunday morning. Nothing, therefore, could be done in that quarter, and Sir Duncan went home to Inverallan, with, however, the express understanding that the affair was to be pushed according to the plan that he and Hardwicke had agreed on, the moment the riding - master should return.

Letters were awaiting Sir Duncan, for he had left long before the post - hour, and among them was one from Ronald, written after receiving his and his parents' epistles. It was but a note that he sent, but it was as manly as it was brief. He acknowledged at once that he had aided Mrs Jenkins in

making her escape, but declined to give any details. "I would answer your questions fully, but for two reasons: first, I am sworn to secrecy, as is obviously necessary; and secondly, if, as is likely, Jenkins endeavours to bring any case against me, I can best serve my friends by leaving them in total ignorance of the matter. This I will say—on my word of honour, I have done nothing that I am ashamed of, or that I would not do again; and I can but ask my best and wisest friends to trust me."

"God bless the boy!" ejaculated Sir Duncan, as he read the note. "There, Alicia and Muriel, read that, and tell me if you'd take that fellow's word or—Captain Badger's?"

"Dear, dear," said Miss Forbes, wiping her eyes, "what a good note! You are quite right, dear brother; he is a very worthy young gentleman."

Muriel said nothing; but as she handed

back the note to her father, he thought he saw a softer expression about her mouth than it had worn for the last two or three days.

To his parents Ronald wrote in much the same strain ; and while Mrs Bennett openly exulted over his letter, the minister admitted that his fears were considerably lessened.

No one, however, was more indignantly certain that Ronald would vindicate himself than Jamie Paterson, to whose ears the tidings had come on that Monday morning as they did to the whole village. One of the daily papers copied the notice in ‘Chit-Chat ;’ and therefore, in a few minutes after the arrival of the post, the place was astir.

Every one had known that something was wrong,—old Nancy’s face alone betrayed that,—but no rumour of the truth had as yet been spread ; so that it burst upon the landlords of the two public-houses, the principal grocer and butcher, and the

two or three others who indulged in daily papers, like a thunder-clap.

Very soon the owner of the Rob Roy was seen crossing the street, paper in hand, to the grocer's shop; the butcher went over to the draper's; and finally, the telegraph-clerk ran into Jamie Paterson with the news. In a fury of indignation the old man put on his coat and hurried away to read the offending notice in the bar of the Rob Roy, and there and then denied it with all the emphasis of his sturdy lungs.

“It’s a confoonded lee! And gin I kenn’t the man that wrote it, I’d gar him feel the weight o’ my airm, though I’m auld. My certie, anger wad gie me back what years hae tane awa’! I’d yoke a’ the lads in the place on him, and pit him in the pond to cool his leein’ tongue—that’s what I’d dae!” cried he, and there was a murmur of assent and applause, for Ronald was popular in his native place, and no one

credited the tale ; or at least, if any one doubted, he or she would not have dared to say so.

“ Phew ! ” said Jamie, wiping his forehead as he went back to his work, “ that’s the maist shamefu’ thing I’ve heard this mony a day. The fule ! It’s little he kens o’ Ronald Bennett, or he wad hae keepit aff that subjec’. He’d no look at ony woman, though she was the vera queen o’ beauty hersel’. Na, na ; auld Jamie kens better nor that : he kens whaur the bit lav’rock hings in the lift ; and a sair heart the laddie ’ll hae when he reads yon paper.”

While Ronald’s affairs were thus the main topic that occupied the thoughts of his friends, he himself had passed a sufficiently anxious week. The daily perusal of the Scotch paper which he had ordered kept him instructed as to the progress of affairs at Piershill, and had given him sufficient warning of impending discovery even

before he had received the sorrowful letters from home, which assured him that Jenkins would soon invade his retreat. All these things did not tend to render him more fit for the examination he was to undergo, but he was quietly determined that no complication of Ellen's or her husband's causing should interfere with his success; and he braced himself for his task, and resolutely banished the one thought which shook him —“What will Muriel say or think?”

Strong in the approbation of his conscience, he had no fear of Mr Jenkins, and he felt confident of his own power to right himself both at the manse and with Sir Duncan; but when he remembered Muriel's grave face, and the constraint of her manner towards him, his heart sank, and he wished that he had never seen poor Ellen again.

At Sandhurst he had met his former cabin companion, Harris — who had so charitably taken charge of him in his

first visit to London, had chosen his tailor for him, and had piloted him to the *levée* —and after a day or two he resolved on admitting him into his confidence.

Harris had already asked him what ailed him, and had commented on his increased gravity and love of solitude; so that it was easy for him to respond fully to his questions.

“I’m in a confounded mess, and if it wouldn’t bore you, I’d like to consult you.”

“Bore me, my dear fellow! Why should it bore me? Come along and have a smoke; I’m twice as clear-headed when I’ve a pipe in my mouth.”

Over a pipe, therefore, Ronald poured forth his tale, and found that Harris had seen Jenkins.

“A brute he is, too,” said he. “Capital fellow at his work—no fault to be found with him there; but I’m devilish sorry for his wife.”

"So am I," replied Ronald, and continued his story. When it was ended, Harris looked at him and knocked the ashes out of his pipe in silence.

"Look here, Bennett,—I'm not given to making professions, but you're a good fellow, and if you want anybody to see you through this or anything else, I'm your man."

"Thank you, Harris, I'm awfully obliged to you," said Ronald, "and I wish you'd give me your advice."

As a result of this conversation, when Ronald was informed on Monday, about 10 o'clock, that Jenkins was waiting to see him, he stepped across to Harris's quarters, and the two entered the room together where Jenkins was drumming restlessly on the window. He turned round sharply as the door opened, and in answer to Harris's salutation, intimated that he came to see Mr Bennett.

"Mr Harris is welcome to hear all that passes between us, Mr Jenkins," said Ronald.

"Oh, he's your witness, is he? That's the way you take advantage of me. I might have brought one too — the conductor that saw you go, for instance. However, if you don't mind listeners, I needn't care either. So, sir, just you tell me where my wife is!"

"I do not know."

"You don't know!" cried Jenkins, and he burst into a coarse laugh.

"I repeat that I do not know, and——"

"Come, you drop that!" said Jenkins, springing up and shaking his fist in Ronald's face, while he poured forth a torrent of abuse and rage.

Ronald never moved or attempted to reply, but after a minute Harris went round and touched the angry man on the arm.

"Did you come here simply to abuse Mr Bennett, or to find your wife, Jenkins?" said he, very quietly. "You'd stand a better chance if you would allow him to tell you all he can."

"All he can? What do you mean?" asked Jenkins, taken aback by the tone adopted towards him. For the first time, the idea of some accident crossed his mind.

"If you will sit down and allow Mr Bennett to explain," said Harris, persuasively, and the riding - master took the chair he offered.

Ronald then made his statement, quietly and briefly, but omitting nothing, and explained to the astonished Jenkins, Ellen's determination to become a nurse.

"And you expect me to swallow all that?" remarked Jenkins, when he had ended.

"I cannot make you believe it, but it is all I can tell you. There is the address

to which I took her, and you must continue your search in town from there."

"Well, this is a queer business. You mean to tell me that you're giving me the address that's to set me on the track to find her?"

"I told Mrs Jenkins that I could, under no circumstances, conceal what I had done. I also told her that I did not wish to know her whereabouts, as I should not think myself bound to aid you further than was necessary to clear her from any shadow of blame which might attach to her on my account."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" remarked Mr Jenkins, and got up and paced the little room. "And if you're so mighty honest and innocent, what made you help her to leave me? That wasn't such a very virtuous action, *I* should say."

Ronald rose, and looked the riding-master steadily in the face.

"I helped her for two reasons: I remember her a pretty, bright-faced, happy girl, and I found her — what you know. The contrast made me pity her. That was one reason; and as for the other," continued Ronald, with the first tone of anger and scorn that had appeared in his voice, "I'm not sure that I wouldn't help any woman to run away whose husband leaves such a mark on her arm as I saw on your wife's on Tuesday."

"And I'd second you, Bennett," said Harris, coolly.

Jenkins glanced at the two gentlemen, and a dull red flush of shame rose to his brow. He looked like a beaten hound as he stood silent before them. Presently, with an effort at defiance, he pointed to the address — "Will you undertake to come to that place with me? It may be a hoax, for all I know."

"Certainly; there's a train in half an

hour," replied Ronald—"I will meet you at the station."

"And no telegraphing or tricks before then?"

"Jenkins, you are a fool," said Harris, emphatically. "Can't you see that Mr Bennett is about as likely to trick you as you are to—to—"

"To believe him," said Jenkins, with another laugh.

"No, that won't do, for you'll have to believe him before you've done with him," replied Harris, so confidently that Jenkins could only stare in mute surprise.

Arrived at the lodgings, to which they went perforce in a cab together, though they had travelled up in separate compartments, Ronald asked to see the landlady, who recognised him in a moment, as his companion observed.

"You remember me?" he said.

"Yes, sir; you brought a lady here last

Wednesday morning. The lady's left, sir.
Did you want rooms?"

"No, thanks; all I want is, that you should, if you will be so kind, tell this gentleman what passed on that morning, and anything you can about the lady."

"I'll do that, sir. The lady was expecting some one to come after her. She was worn out, sir, and she cried like as if her heart would break; and I was trying to cheer her, sir, as I told you I would, and I saw her poor arm, sir,"—here the good woman bestowed an angry look on Jenkins. "Some coward must have hurt you," says I, "and whoever did that deserves to go to jail for it;" and then she told me a deal, sir, about you, and how you'd been a real gentleman and helped her, and how she was afraid—and she shook as she said it—that she'd be found out and forced to go back to that brute of a husband, sir; and says I, 'You keep quiet, and don't tell me

one word of where you're going ; and then, though they put me in the witness-box, they couldn't get anything from me ;' and she says 'Yes ;' and after two days she went away, and took her box, and she looked quite bright and pretty, and says she, 'It's all right—I've got work now.' She kissed me, the poor dear, and thanked me—and very glad I was, sir, to see her safe away, and hope she'll keep safe."

"Do you want to know anything more ?" said Ronald, when the garrulous landlady paused.

"No," answered Jenkins, with a smothered oath—"I'm beat ;" and he stood twisting his moustache, his eyes fixed on the floor, and, Ronald fancied, something like compunction working in his face.

" You say she wanted to get work—she was afraid of going back ?" he said, abruptly.

" Her hope and prayer—yes, sir, her prayer

every blessed night of her life was, that she might be let alone to work for her living, wherever she's gone."

"Then, —, she shall do it!" exclaimed Jenkins, and hastily left the house, Ronald following, after he had given the landlady a further acknowledgment for her kindness to poor Ellen.

The street was almost empty, and Jenkins stood an instant meditating on all that had occurred.

"Suppose she hadn't found work,—I suppose she's in one of these hospitals, where nurses get diplomas—lots of soldiers' wives do it,—were you going to leave her to fight her way in this big town? I'm ready to take your word now," said he.

"I told her in that case, and in that case only, to write to me."

"Oh, you did! And what would your next move have been?"

"I should have secured those rooms for

her, and have written her whole history to a lady in Scotland, who could, I have no doubt, have assisted her."

"By George, that woman was right! I believe you are a gentleman—and I've made a mistake. Well, I'll leave Ellen alone. I've not used her over - well, I allow, and she may as well have her way. I'd like to say so if I could find her."

"Do you not mean to search for her?"

"No: I've neither time nor money to hunt all London after her; and if she's to go, I'd better keep out of her way. Now then, Mr Bennett, will you let bygones be bygones? I'm—yes—I'm sorry I went to that manse."

"Appearances were all against me, Mr Jenkins—I know that. I am glad you acquit me of blame, and am quite willing to say no more about it."

"Will you shake hands?" said Jenkins, tendering a broad red paw, which

Ronald took, though not over-willingly, for it had inflicted that black bruise on Ellen's arm.

"You spoke of an anonymous letter you had received; did you identify the writer?" he asked.

"No, I didn't; and upon my soul, now that I've seen you, I don't know what to make of it. However, that's my secret."

"Of course. Well, good morning; I must return to Sandhurst at once."

"Good-bye, then. I'll go north to-morrow. As I am here I may as well enjoy all the day at my old quarters, 10 Cheyne Street, Strand. Capital rooms there. I'll go and see the 'Masked Ball' to-night. Seen it yet?"

"No, I have not."

"And you are close to town! I've a friend playing in it; plays the count, and does it well too. I'll get an order from him,—could get you one if you liked."

"Many thanks, but I really have not time. Good morning."

So, with show of civility, these two separated, each secretly relieved that the interview that threatened to be so stormy had passed off so quietly.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE "Z." TRICK.

RONALD'S troubles, however, were by no means at an end ; for on his arrival at Sandhurst, Harris, with a somewhat uneasy countenance, met him.

" Well, how did it end ? "

" Quite amicably," said Ronald ; " and the fellow wanted to take me to the theatre, by way of reward for saving his wife. However, we ought not to be hard on him, for he did show some signs of contrition, and he's agreed to let Ellen alone for the future. I hope he'll stick to that resolve."

" Well, my dear fellow, I'm sorry there's something unpleasant in to-day's paper. I

opened it; and if the post had been ten minutes earlier, I'd have run to the station that you might have tried to get something out of Jenkins about it," replied Harris, handing him the Scotch paper with the copied paragraph from 'Chit-Chat.'

He expected Ronald to express vexation on its perusal, but he was not prepared for the sudden change that swept over his face, and left it of an ashy paleness.

"Halloo, old man! Don't let that infernal stuff upset you so. What's the matter?" he asked, anxiously.

"I can't tell. It's impossible—it must be impossible," stammered Ronald, looking again at the paper, as if to find some information there. "Harris, either this is a lie, for which some one shall be punished, or—or—I'll never put faith in man or woman again!"

"But, my dear fellow, do explain it—who is 'Z.'?"

"There is only one lady near my home who has known me long or well, and this impudent paper must be aware of the fact; but that she should turn against me in that way—let me see—the writer of the anonymous letter. Oh, I can't believe it—it's impossible! She may blame me, but she wouldn't soil her hands in that fashion."

"Do you mind telling me who she is?"

Ronald hesitated a moment before replying. "Half confidences are no use, and I need your help now in earnest. This is more serious than a dozen Jenkinses. You remember hearing of Mrs Leslie?"

"Sir Duncan Forbes's daughter—yes."

"She is the lady I mean, and the kindest friend man ever had."

"She! My dear Bennett, dismiss all fears from your mind. She has had nothing to do with this."

"Then who the deuce is 'Z.'? If, as I believe, this is a miserable libel, I swear

some one shall suffer, if I have to throw up everything to do it," cried he, passionately.

"Let me think a moment. I wish we had Jenkins here still. When was he to leave town?"

"To-morrow. He's at a place in Cheyne Street, Strand—No. 10, I think he said."

"Then I'll go and see him. You can't be away all night, for you must stick to your work; but I'll run up, and if I don't worm something out of him, I shall be surprised. I'll come back straight, and then we'll decide what's to be done next. If we can't find 'Z.' out without going to Scotland, we'll run down together."

"But I don't like to trespass on your time," began Ronald, but his friend cut him short.

"Now don't say anything more of that sort. I'm interested now, and I wouldn't miss the fun for a good deal. Ta, ta! I'll see Jenkins to-night."

True to his word, Harris went to town, and after some searching discovered the lodgings in which Jenkins had taken up his abode. He was out, gone to the theatre, and would not be back till late; but by means of a liberal tip, Harris obtained permission to return after his own dinner and wait there till Mr Jenkins should come home.

The riding-master had passed a jovial evening with his friends, and was not altogether pleased to see Mr Harris thus in occupation of his apartment, although he could not well refuse him the few minutes' interview that he requested. As soon as the subject of it was broached, he attempted to decline all conversation, asserting somewhat surlily that the whole affair was closed, and that he didn't see why it should be reopened.

“It is not by any means closed,” replied Harris. “You cannot expect that my friend,

who has behaved all through like a man of honour, will sit down quietly and allow himself to be slandered by such an abominable paragraph as this," and he handed the paper to Jenkins, who read it with a perplexed face.

" You have an opportunity of behaving handsomely now if you choose, by telling us all you can about your correspondent. Of course, if you will not help us, we must look elsewhere," continued Harris.

" Upon my word, I can't tell you. A fellow doesn't care to say he don't know a thing, but to you, Mr Harris, I will say it. I'll take my oath I know no more of 'Z.' than you do, except that she's near Stirling."

As nothing he could say seemed to shake this statement, Harris was forced to go away with his curiosity unsatisfied; and unfortunately, though he turned back to get a light for his cigar, he was just too

late to see the mocking nod with which Jenkins viewed him depart.

Returning early to Sandhurst, he held a further consultation with Ronald, who, hitherto calm and self-reliant, was now in a state of alternate depression and anger that almost incapacitated him from reflection. He believed that he had passed an excellent examination, thanks to the thoroughness of his knowledge, which had carried him through in spite of the conflicting thoughts that distracted his attention ; but success, if he had won it, seemed at this moment valueless to him, since he could hardly ask for congratulation even in his own home, and knew not if he were regarded as criminal by the woman he revered and loved.

In this dilemma, Harris proved an invaluable friend. He made his plans, arranged necessary matters, and kept him from sinking into a condition of morbid

gloom before the hour for exertion should arrive. They were to leave for the north on Tuesday night—just one week after the journey that had been so momentous in its results.

Jenkins, too, travelled by the same train ; but neither he nor either of our friends were aware of the fact at starting. They met at the counter of the York refreshment-room, and the riding-master accosted them with easy familiarity.

"Going north so soon, gentlemen ? I thought you were both tied at the college for the present ?"

"Business takes us north," returned Ronald, shortly. He could not believe that this man was as ignorant as he pretended to be of his correspondent, and even suspected him of having a hand in the composition of the notice in 'Chit-Chat.' But in this he did Mr Jenkins's literary powers injustice.

"Business—eh? Connected with Stirling, perhaps?"

"Yes," said Harris, taking up the dialogue in his imperturbable tones, for he saw that Ronald's temper was hardly to be trusted. "I told you that if you couldn't help us we should go elsewhere, and we are going. We mean to run 'Z.' to earth before we've done with her."

"And he," said Jenkins, in a low tone, indicating Ronald, "really has no idea about her?"

"No. How on earth should he?"

"O Lor'! *I* don't know. I thought when I got the 'Z.' note that it was some affair of a woman—jealous, you know, and all that sort of thing; and when he asked me about it, I took it for a draw. But since you're going north——" he paused.

"You may come to believe that gentlemen speak the truth," replied Harris, haughtily.

The bell clanged, and they hastened back to their carriages ; but as they crossed the platform, Jenkins looked up in Harris's face, and nudging his elbow, said—

" Come now, Mr Harris, don't be so confoundedly hard on me. You know as well as I do that lots of gentlemen in the service—and out of it too, I daresay—like to have their joke ; and then they don't always speak the truth—they only *say* they do."

" Yes, confound them ! I know it very well," rejoined Harris ; and as he flung himself back in his place, he reflected, not for the first time, on the laxity of speech which enabled a man of the Jenkins stamp to foil him with such a thrust as had just been delivered.

Amidst the perplexities of the previous afternoon Ronald had been perfectly clear on one point. He would not run the risk of hearing any harsh words from his father, as might well be the case ; and therefore

he would not go to the manse until he was sure of the reception that he would meet with—nor even then, unless he were absolutely certain that there was no chance of his seeing Muriel. The mere thought of encountering her sent the blood to his head. It would be a thing that he could not endure to face while this abominable doubt hung over him and her.

Not until he had done his utmost—nay, not until he had succeeded in unmasking the creature who had dared to insult her—not until he had wrung from that cowardly paper an abject apology,—would he be able to meet her clear eyes without compunction and shame. Even when he had done all that he expected and hoped to do, he would still feel that he deserved forgiveness, since through him her name had been—if not literally, at least by inference—dragged into this vulgar and public notice.

Such thoughts as these, coursing rapidly

through his brain, made him a dull travelling companion; but Harris, fortunately for himself, was one of those composed persons who can settle themselves as easily and for as sound a sleep in a railway carriage as in their accustomed beds. He consequently was fresh and alert when the pair arrived in Edinburgh; and he persuaded Ronald, who looked as jaded as his companion was the reverse, to get out and go up to a hotel for tub and breakfast, and then proceed to Stirling by a later train. Ronald agreed, as in his present state of mind he would have agreed to anything his friend proposed; and it was not, therefore, till past eleven that they again started for Stirling in one of those slow trains that make the traveller who has come by express from the south, imagine that he has reached a land where hurry is unknown.

They intended to take rooms for the night at the Golden Lion, and were to

visit the police-office that afternoon—after which Ronald meant to write to his mother, and, according to the results of the previous interview, would ask her to come and see him, or would arrange to go over to the manse at an early hour on the following day.

He had not written home, as he had intended to do, immediately after the conclusion of his difficulties with Jenkins. The press of work required for the last day of the examination, and the confusion of his thoughts resulting from the newspaper paragraph, had put to flight all idea of correspondence, and he began to feel anxious now as to the effect of this unfortunate business on his mother's health and spirits. Again and again, too, did he speculate as to his father's attitude towards him, wondering if, as of old, he would at once conclude him to be in the wrong, or if he would at last show a generous confidence in him.

Of one person alone did he feel tolerably

certain. Sir Duncan Forbes would understand his position, and would accept his statement; though even with regard to him, Ronald felt that he must suffer from the mere fact that he had been the unconscious cause of annoyance that would be peculiarly trying to a man of Sir Duncan's nature. It was no wonder that he was out of spirits —that he felt as though his luck were deserting him ; and but for the presence of the cheery and confident Harris, he would have lost courage altogether.

In the meantime, his affairs had continued to be the only topic of interest in Tillybodle and its immediate neighbourhood, and feeling on the subject was running high. When in a very small community an event takes place which brings one of its number into notoriety, it is extraordinary how many people have had forebodings or suspicions, as the case may be, upon the matter.

Cruel as it seemed, there were not wanting people in the village to say that they “aye thocht there was something strange in Mr Bennett,” or, said some, “in Mrs Leslie.” These prophets of evil, however, were happily in the minority ; and taken as a whole, it might be said that the people of Tillybodle would have given an unpleasantly warm welcome to any one who had taken part in the composition of paragraphs that were instinctively felt to be libels on the high-minded lady whose gentle presence among them was as welcome as it was familiar.

When the south post arrived on Monday, and again on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings, without bringing a letter from Ronald, both Mr and Mrs Bennett began to feel more than ever anxious—since, if Jenkins had, as Sir Duncan reported, gone to London for the express purpose of seeing him, there had been ample time

for him to communicate the result by wire, if not by letter. The silence seemed ominous of evil. Mrs Bennett feared there had been a quarrel, and her husband dreaded disgrace, so that old Nancy might well remark that "the hoose was as dowie as if there were a corpse in it that a'body was feared to see."

At Inverallan, however, a strange thing occurred. The very paragraph which, in Ronald's estimation, was enough to peril the existence of Muriel's friendship for him, and the memory of which it seemed to him would remain like a sort of unexorcised ghost to haunt him, had produced in her mind a reaction in his favour. She had suspected him herself—had been a prey to doubts which, although she did not know it, were in reality born of a species of jealousy. She had maintained a disparaging silence when her father and aunt were confident in their assurance of his truth, and

she had remonstrated with Laura Hardwicke for her rash and outspoken adhesion to his cause.

Laura's bewilderment had been extreme when the one person on whose kind judgment she thought her friend Ronald could count, thus arrayed herself against him ; for to her impetuous spirit only two positions were possible—she must either consider Ronald altogether in the wrong, or she must regard him as an injured hero, capable of who knows what Quixotic and extraordinary actions.

Muriel, on the contrary, considered either extreme unwise. Too just to condemn him utterly, her heart refused to be satisfied, or to forget entirely the unfortunate phrase in which it still seemed to her that he had prevaricated.

When, however, on the Sunday morning, Sir Duncan carried ‘Chit-Chat’ to her, and advised her to read the offending passage, so

as to be prepared for any remarks that she might hear, an opposing tide of feeling set in. Whatever he might have done, however he might have fallen short of the high standard she had unconsciously set up in her mind as his own, she felt at once that this paragraph would be to him a source of bitter annoyance, and even humiliation, for which she could not but pity him.

On her own account she cared less than her father had anticipated. It was certainly startling to find that others besides Mrs Bennett could suppose her capable of writing an anonymous letter. She had forgiven mamsie for her want of faith in her—for she felt that at the moment when she uttered the doubt, she was not in her usual condition of mind; but here was the same black statement actually in print, and therefore it would seem that some one else misjudged her equally.

"It is very unfortunate, papa," she said,

quietly ; “but one can do nothing, and it does not really matter.”

“That is the best way to take it, certainly,” rejoined Sir Duncan, who was himself in not so calm a mood.

“Poor Ronald !” said Muriel presently, her eyes still fixed on the paper.

“Eh ! why do you pity him now ?” inquired Sir Duncan, surprised that the pity which had hitherto been refused should be expressed at this particular moment.

“He will be very sorry and vexed about this—that is all I meant,” answered Muriel, with ever so faint a blush. “I am glad I have seen it, however. Now I shall be ready to reply should any one speak to me of it to-day.”

There is no doubt that many people in the church who had seen ‘Chit-Chat’ that morning, thought of the obnoxious passage as they glanced at the pew where Mrs Leslie sat ; and in particular, an officer who

was not often seen in the building, scrutinised her with cautious but interested glances. What he saw gave him no satisfaction. It was now nearly a year since her husband's death, and she allowed herself to dispense with the stifling veil that had often oppressed her to the verge of faintness. He could study her beautiful profile, therefore, at his ease; but no shadow of vexation, past or present, disturbed its sculptured repose. It is to be feared, however, that Muriel's attention to the sermon was by no means so complete as usual, and that beneath the calm exterior a self-examination was going on, the results of which were far from being satisfactory to her.

If she could be said to be proud of anything, it was of her own justness of mind. Trained by her father, and in a lesser degree by her husband, to consider hasty and ill-founded judgments the special weakness of half-educated or ignorant persons,

she was especially careful to refrain from the commission of a fault she despised, and in reality owed much of her power and influence to her habit of justice, and her restrained and accurate speech. And now she was forced to admit to herself that she had been in some degree guilty of weakness.

She had not refrained, as she might have done, from drawing unfavourable conclusions ; and certainly she had shown towards Ronald a grudging and suspicious temper, which, as she reflected sadly, was hardly what he had reason to expect at her hands. As yet her confessions went no further than this. She had not sought for any reason or excuse for her unkindness, and it had not yet occurred to her that it was only because of her deep interest in Ronald that she had been ready to judge him so harshly.

In the midst of her self-reproaches the service ended, and she rose and passed out

of the church, and joined the groups lingering as usual about the pathway to exchange their greetings, discuss the news, and arrange, perhaps, something for the ensuing week.

Sir Duncan, seeing Badger passing, stepped aside and accosted him.

"I heard from Bennett about that affair. His letter quite satisfied me, and I am happy to say you were mistaken."

"Oh, indeed! Of course he will *say* so, Sir Duncan," returned Badger, sarcastically.

Sir Duncan looked at him with equal scorn. "Of course, I only suppose my friend's word to be of the same value as my own."

"You would not have him compromise a woman, would you, Sir Duncan?" replied Badger, and passed on.

No one said a word to Muriel about 'Chit-Chat,' but a friend turned the conver-

sation a little too abruptly when some one alluded to a clever squib that had appeared in its pages. Muriel had no doubt that they feared to tread on delicate ground.

It was a strange affair altogether; and in the end, she could only ask herself the two questions which were occupying so many minds: Who is Ronald's enemy? and, Who in the world is "Z."? She was not without hope that an answer would be found to the last of the two; for though Hardwicke did not confide to her the surmise that he communicated to her father, he took an opportunity of assuring her that he was himself confident that he would ultimately discover the culprit.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RUN TO EARTH.

HARDWICKE had taken measures to keep himself informed as to the movements of the riding-master, and Jenkins had only been three or four hours at Piershill when a card was brought to him, with a message that the gentleman particularly wished to see him.

“ Mr Alfred Burton, 10 Northumberland Terrace. I never heard of him before. Show him up,” replied he, sitting back in his American chair and taking out a tooth-pick. He was a little depressed this morning. He had not slept well in the train, and there was no denying that his rooms

looked dull and empty without Ellen. Though women were fools, they certainly managed to keep the house neat and comfortable. In this mood he rather welcomed the visit of a stranger, which promised him at least a few minutes' distraction ; but he was less pleased when Mr Burton introduced himself as the junior partner of the well-known firm of Burton, Deadlock, & Co.

“ We have, of course, heard of the misfortune which has overtaken you,” began the lawyer.

“ How do you know it's a misfortune ? I may be devilish glad to get rid of Mrs Jenkins, for anything you can tell,” interrupted Jenkins.

“ Quite possible, my dear sir—quite possible ; but you can understand that we assume the reverse until we have proof that we are mistaken,” returned Burton, blandly.

“Humph! Well?”

“Well, sir, I am interested in the case from another point of view. I may say that I am pledged to devote myself to one most interesting point in connection with it; and as it is a matter likely to involve a good many people, and to obtain notoriety, I am, of course, anxious to fulfil my undertakings in regard to it.”

“Well?” said Jenkins again. He was suspicious of his visitor, and unwilling to commit himself in any way.

“Well, my dear sir, the first person likely to assist me—the one on whose help I hope I may reckon, and whose shrewdness and practical sense are certain to be invaluable to me—is, I need hardly say, Mr Jenkins.”

“What on earth are you driving at, sir? Can’t you come to the point?”

“Certainly—certainly. The point is simply this, *who is ‘Z.’?*”

“——‘Z.’!” cried Jenkins, springing up

and kicking away a footstool ; “ I’m sick of ‘ Z.’ ! Why, a fellow came to my room, sir, just before I left town, nailed me at two in the morning, to ask me that question ; and now I haven’t been here a day, not half a day, before I’m asked it again ! ”

“ I mentioned that a good many people were likely to be involved, but a few words from you will rid you of all further trouble in the matter. Who is ‘ Z.’ ? ”

“ I don’t know,” roared Jenkins. “ How the deuce should I know ? The letter was anonymous, I tell you. I wish I’d burnt it, for it sent me on a fool’s errand, after all.”

“ *Pre-cisely*—that is what I imagined,” said the lawyer impressively, gazing out at the sky as he spoke.

“ Eh ! what’s that ? What do you know about it ? ” asked Jenkins sharply, stopping in his walk up and down the room, and eyeing him closely.

“I know enough to be confident of that,—confident that you were sent, as you say, though it is a strong expression, on a fool’s errand.”

“Do you mean that ‘Z.’ knew that? Then what did she do it for? I wish you’d be a little plainer.”

“Gently, my dear sir. I am not acting for myself in this matter, and must guide my words accordingly. You have information to give; so have I. A mutual interchange would be beneficial to both of us; but if you are not inclined to come to any arrangement, I shall commence operations from a different quarter, that is all.”

“And much good it will do you even if you discover ‘Z.’ Who is to be the better of it? Not I, I suspect.”

“Have you seen ‘Chit-Chat’?”

“Yes, of course I have.”

“Do you suppose that the friends of the lady at whom that paragraph points, are

going to let it pass unnoticed? I assure you they mean to drag the real 'Z.' into the light, sooner or later."

"Well, I don't see what I've got to do with it, and I don't care how soon I hear the last of it," returned Jenkins, sulkily.

Hitherto Mr Burton had spoken in the silkiest of tones, and with an air of extreme politeness; but now he rose abruptly and took his hat.

"Very well, Mr Jenkins, I may wish you good morning. Had you proved willing to assist us, I could have guaranteed that you should hear nothing more of 'Z.' As it is, you will probably not only hear of 'Z.',' but you may read before long in the papers an account of 'Z's.' treatment of you. You were made a cat's-paw, sir, as you will find out."

With a bow Mr Burton made for the door, but Jenkins rushed forward and stopped him. Here was the very thing he feared, and which he thought to avoid

by remaining silent, assuming fresh shape to torment him.

“Here, I say, don’t be in such a hurry—give a fellow time to think. It’s the lady’s friends who are acting in this,—it isn’t Mr Bennett’s?”

“The lady’s friends are Mr Bennett’s also; but it is to her that apology is chiefly due from ‘Z.’ Mr Bennett can settle his own affairs.”

“I believe you!” said Jenkins, shortly. “Well, sit down again and let’s talk it over. What I want to know is, why ‘Z.’ should have meddled at all in the affair. What had she to do with my wife’s disappearance?”

“It was done simply to gratify a personal spite. I will tell you more when I have your information.”

“Here goes, then,” returned Jenkins, with a sigh, and he proceeded to give a full account of his visit to Stirling in accordance

with the suggestion in the anonymous letter.

Burton listened silently, only nodding his head with a satisfied smile at the first mention of the gentleman who represented “Z.” and this evidence of knowledge incited Jenkins to go on.

“What kind of man was he?” asked Burton, when the other had ended his account.

“Queer-looking chap. Face like an officer, regulation cut of hair, long black moustache; clothes more like a civilian, seedy suit, rather dark colour.”

“Your evidence is admirable, Mr Jenkins. I wish every witness were as clear. Now for two questions. Had he a blood-stone ring on the little finger of his right hand?”

“Oh, you know him, I see. Yes, he had. He wore shabby black gloves—looked like a seedy clerk; but he took one off to write an address, and I saw the ring.”

"Capital! And have you—it would be almost too much luck—but have you by chance kept that address?"

"I have, sir," replied Jenkins, with a laugh. "I'm not so dull as people think in some things. I never tear up papers that may be useful. Here it is," and he took from his old pocket-book the scrap on which Badger had written the Bennetts' address.

"Bravo!" cried Burton, quite excited by such unexpected good fortune. "Now, Mr Jenkins, I'll tell you all about 'Z.' We had moral certainty to go on, but we wanted positive proof, and, thanks to you, we've got it. The gentleman you saw is Captain Badger of the 2d—and *he is 'Z.'!*"

"You don't say so? What in the name of wonder—" began Jenkins, gazing at him in blank amazement.

"You may well look astonished; but there's no doubt about it. Here's a note

of his, and you can see the writing is the same as in your address—a broad round hand. This one, too, is addressed to Tilly-bodle ; and you can compare the two words —precisely similar, as you see. Badger hates Mr Bennett like poison, and he has been set down more than once by the lady to whom ‘Chit-Chat’ alludes. He cared no more for you and your wife than for that footstool ; but he knew that by sending you to the manse, and inserting that paragraph, he was bringing unhappiness on the people he disliked. A nice specimen, isn’t he ? ”

“ What a cad ! Well, sir, I’m not particular, but I’m dashed if I’d play such a trick as that ! ”

“ So I supposed, Mr Jenkins ; and I think you would have regretted it had you not helped us.”

“ I should think so. Look here, Mr Burton, if you want my evidence, I’ll give it

anywhere you choose. You may count upon me. By George, I'm as anxious to be down on that fellow as you are!"

"I'm delighted to hear it; and though I don't think we shall have occasion to trouble you, I shall remember your promise. Now I must wish you good morning. I may take this precious bit of paper?"

"With all my heart. And, I say, couldn't you let me know how it goes on? I'd like to see the thing through."

"You shall certainly hear," replied Burton; and hastening to his hansom, he drove as rapidly as possible back to his office, where Hardwicke was awaiting his return.

"Well?" said he eagerly, as Burton entered.

"Just as you thought, my dear fellow. Never had better luck in my life. Evidence complete, even to a piece of writing. And that ruffian Jenkins as keen as possible in pursuit of the other ruffian. Upon my

word, Badger's the worse scoundrel of the two!"

"I think he is," said Hardwicke. "This is delightful. I only wish Bennett were here to enjoy the triumph. Tell me all about it, and then we'll settle how to catch our man most effectually."

"And effectively. Remember, to a fellow like that, it is the publicity of his failure that stings. If you go and tell him in a private room that you know he's a cad, and have found out the 'Z.' trick, he'll make his bow, and not care a button. But show him up before half-a-dozen men who believe in him, and you can make him wince. Couldn't you manage it at the club, for instance?"

"I daresay I might. You may be sure I won't spare him," rejoined Hardwicke, and the lawyer sat down, and at leisure unfolded his budget of information.

When he described Badger's attire, Hard-

wicke interrupted him. “I’ve seen him in those clothes, and wondered at them ; and now I think of it, he was coming out of the ‘Chit-Chat’ office on his way to the station, and crossed the street so as to avoid me. I’m certain he saw me.”

“Perhaps it may have been that very day ?”

“No ; it was longer ago than that. I wonder if he puts on that suit when he’s up to some wickedness. I daresay it wouldn’t be convenient for him to be recognised always. They say he is connected with a lot of third-rate sensational periodicals.”

“Penny dreadfuls, I should think,” replied Burton, continuing his account. Hardwicke was not long in settling the method of his vengeance, and invited his friend to come out with him to Broomieknowe and see it executed ; but Burton, sorely against his will, was forced to refuse, owing to a press of business which prevented him from leaving town.

Hardwicke, therefore, left for Stirling alone, just two hours after Ronald and Harris had done so. He would have to wait there for a short while, as his dog-cart, for which he had telegraphed, could hardly reach the station by the time of his arrival; and during his journey he debated with himself as to whether he should call, in the interval, on the editor of ‘Chit-Chat.’ He decided in the negative, although he longed to take the first step towards his ends—longed to be doing something towards the exposure of what Mr Burton had felicitously called the “Z.” trick.

He had such ample material in his hands, that he felt tempted to act without pausing to consult Sir Duncan; but besides that this was hardly fair, prudence suggested that if he were to broach the subject to the editor, the wary Badger might find means to escape him. He determined, therefore, to go straight to the club, and

there await the dog-cart. There would be time for him to drive to Inverallan before returning home ; and Sir Duncan, who knew of his expedition to Edinburgh, would certainly have remained in the house on the chance of his coming. He looked at his watch at the station,—the dog-cart could not possibly arrive for at least half an hour,—so he walked very leisurely up the road, and turned towards the club. As he did so, he observed two gentlemen on the other side, at the sight of whom he started ; and hurrying across, he seized one of them by the hand.

“ Bennett ! When did you come ? The very thing I was wishing for. I was thinking of telegraphing to you. What a piece of luck ! Have you passed ? ” said he, all in a breath, while Harris gazed at him with much the same complacency with which a large and placid dog regards the gambols of an excited terrier.

A shade of annoyance had crossed Ronald's face as he saw Hardwicke approaching, but it vanished before the cordiality of his greeting, and he tried to answer his eager questions.

"I shall not know for some time about the exam., but I think it's all right. I came down last night. Let me introduce my friend Harris of the —th." Hardwicke bowed, but inwardly wished that Ronald had been alone, so that he might have poured out at once the history of his discovery.

"Why were you thinking of wiring for me?" continued Ronald.

"Well, on account of a horrid business—I should say, of a very satisfactory business. Affair of your own, connected with Jenkins," he added in a lower tone.

"You don't say so! Then it is the same business that has brought Harris to Scotland. Let us turn back to the inn and talk it over."

"Why not the club?"

"No, no; there will be fellows coming in there, and I don't want to see any one," replied Ronald; and the three went back as he proposed, and in the gloomy sitting-room assigned to them, sat down to compare notes.

The conversation, as might have been expected, was a lengthy one—so much so, that but for a timely remembrance on Hardwicke's part, his dog-cart might have driven back to Broomieknowe in despair of his arrival.

The happy chances of that day were not yet over, as he found to his delight. After hearing all that Ronald had to tell, he began his own story, and with boyish glee refrained till the last possible moment from mentioning Badger's name. Ronald might have become impatient at his delay, had he not felt from his smiling countenance that everything was coming right in the end;

and acting on this conviction, he waited calmly for the expected *dénouement*, and watched with pleasure his friend's pleased and eager face.

"Now don't you know who 'Z.' is?" said Hardwicke, asking that question for the last time.

"I haven't an idea," rejoined Ronald.

"'Z.' is Captain Badger of the 2d."

"To be sure! What a dolt I was not to remember him!" said Harris quietly, while Ronald remained silent, more hurt by this revelation of his brother officer's baseness than he cared to show.

"Why so? do you know him?" inquired Hardwicke.

"No, but my brother is in the —th, Badger's original regiment. He had to leave it, and exchanged into the 2d. My brother's a youngster, and joined afterwards, but of course he knew about him."

"What did he do?"

"Oh, there was a scandal—an affair in the regiment about a lady—and Badger got hold of it, and tried just the same trick as he has done now,—he wrote an anonymous letter."

"And was found out?"

"Yes, and very nearly got a thrashing. Some say he did get it. He had to leave, of course."

"Did you know this on board ship, Harris?" asked Ronald.

"No. I always had an idea that I had heard something against him, but I couldn't remember what it was. Any one could see he was a cad. After you left town, I went down to my brother at Aldershot, and happened to mention him one day, and then he told me about this old affair. I had forgotten the name of the man, and the regiment he exchanged into."

"Captain Badger will have to exchange again. The regiment will hardly stand

him now," said Ronald, in a tone of intense bitterness.

"Ah, you'll tell the colonel?"

"If he doesn't, the colonel will hear it from others," said Hardwicke.

"I shall state the whole thing to one of the senior officers privately," said Ronald.

"Quite right; he's not a credit to your regiment," remarked Harris.

"But do you know, Hardwicke, this discovery has quite changed my opinion about the way in which we should proceed next. I would rather avoid any public exposure of a man who is in the regiment," said Ronald.

"Why, what difference can that make?" asked Hardwicke with surprise, while Harris glanced at Ronald approvingly.

"A great deal of difference. I don't like to see our uniform disgraced, and I should much prefer a private meeting in which Badger might be made to give a formal apology."

"Then you might as well let him off scot-free. Burton said just the same as I do—a man of that stamp can only be punished publicly. No, no, Ronald; I've hunted him down, and I'm not going to let him off. He slandered you in the club, and in the club I'll expose him."

"Then I would rather not be present."

"I think Bennett is right," said Harris, observing Hardwicke's mortified look. "You can speak more freely in some respects in his absence."

"That is true. Well, I suppose it must be as you like. And now that we have done talking, you must both come out with me to Broomieknowe. It's getting late; I shall barely have time to drive over and tell Sir Duncan."

"I can't come, Hardwicke. I didn't mean to go home till I knew how the land lay; and even as it is, I'd rather wait till the whole thing is cleared up. But

if you'll save Harris from an evening here, I shall be grateful to you."

"But, my dear fellow," began Hardwicke, but Ronald shook his head.

"I must have my own way in this too," he said. "I would rather remain here till the hour of the meeting to-morrow, if you think it could be managed so soon."

"It shall be managed. You'll come out with me at least, Harris?"

"And leave Bennett? That's rather hard lines for him."

"Not a bit. I shall not be good company, and you don't know what you're refusing. You had far better go," said Ronald, smiling.

"Very well, I will," replied Harris, and rang for the waiter to fetch down his portmanteau.

"I'll tell you what I will do, Hardwicke," said Ronald. "If you are to manage this affair at three, I will drive out

then to the manse. I'll send a note to-night to let my mother know. And I say, old fellow, you mustn't be vexed with me for keeping away."

"Not a bit—not a bit. I daresay your friend is right; I shall be able to hit even harder than if you were there," returned Hardwicke; and the dog-cart being ready, he and Harris departed to Broomieknowe.

It was too late to go on to Inverallan that night, and return to dinner; but a note was despatched to Sir Duncan, informing him of the day's adventures, and requesting his presence in the club by three o'clock on the following day. He kept the contents of the note to himself, thinking it best to wait till the affair was concluded, and he could clear Ronald once for all. Perhaps he thought that Ronald himself might like to explain the identity of "Z." with the man whom Muriel had so inveterately disliked.

At Broomieknowe the evening sped fast and agreeably. Hardwicke had not lost a moment in telling his sister of his discovery, and she had applauded his friendly zeal, and sympathised with his excitement, in a way that Harris thought it pleasant to see. He himself was accepted at once by her as Mr Bennett's friend, and therefore her brother's; and she chatted away brightly, and apologised for the plainness of her dinner in a manner that took her guest by storm.

"Ernest used to be fond of made dishes, but now he does not care for them, and so when we are alone our fare is very plain," she said.

"I rather agree with your brother, Miss Hardwicke; I think one gets tired of rich things."

"Yes, I believe one does, though they are very nice at times."

"You were always an epicure, Laura; I

taught you myself, and you give up your fancies now most womanfully to me."

"But you might have your own fancies attended to," suggested Harris.

"Oh, imagine my having special *entrées* made all for myself, while Ernest ate his joint! That would be comic," laughed Laura, with an affectionate glance at her brother.

Certainly she looked very handsome tonight ; and Harris, who could talk well when he chose, exerted himself to please her.

"Mr Bennett is very fortunate in possessing such friends," he remarked once, when the conversation reverted to the engrossing topic.

"Yet I did not like him at all at first," replied Laura.

"Indeed ! and what changed your opinion ?"

The girl coloured, and she was one of the favoured few who look the prettier for blushing.

"I am afraid I was very silly, and I thought him too sensible," she said ; "but he converted me in time."

"Lucky fellow ! I wish I had been in his place," murmured Harris.

"It was not by making pretty speeches that he did it, Mr Harris," rejoined Laura, quickly.

"Ah ! was it by his *not* making them ?"

"Partly," she replied, with a conscious look.

"Then I'll never make another," answered her companion, but with so serious an air that she could but laugh again.

"You and Harris seemed to get on capitally," remarked Ernest to her next morning.

"I think he is charming," replied his sister.

"Then I suppose if I can get him to stay I may do so ? I want to bring them all back to dinner. Couldn't you get Miss

Forbes or Mrs Leslie, or both, to come over?"

"I will try, but bring Mr Harris by all means," said Laura, who was used to her brother's impromptu dinner-parties, and was always equal to the occasion.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HARDWICKE TRUMPS THE “Z.” TRICK.

THE following day was brilliantly fine, and a little after two Ronald set out for his home, passing, as he approached the village, the carriages which took Sir Duncan and his two friends from Broomieknowe into Stirling.

Hardwicke had sent off invitations on the previous night, urgently requesting two or three gentlemen to meet him at the same hour. There appeared, in reply to his notes, the county magnate who had been at the table on the day when Badger made his statement respecting Mrs Jenkins; the old colonel whose muttered disapprobation

on the same occasion Hardwicke had remembered ; the squire whom he suspected of favouring Badger's views ; and lastly, an officer quartered in the Castle, and whom he had invited in order that Badger might not carry his own version of the scene to the mess. There were other gentlemen coming and going during the morning—for it was the day of another local meeting—and as Hardwicke had anticipated, those who lunched at the club had not left when he arrived. He could not write a note to the man he intended to expose, but he sent up his card to the Castle, with a request written on it that he would come down and see him ; and Badger, suspecting nothing, complied at once.

He was a little taken aback at the extreme coolness of Hardwicke's greeting, but he went forward to the mantelpiece, and leaning against it, said leisurely, " Well, what's your news to-day ? "

"I have a few words to say to you, Captain Badger, which these gentlemen will also hear," began Hardwicke, in distinct tones. "I think Sir Duncan Forbes should have been the speaker, but he has left the task to me, as I have been lucky enough to make some discoveries. You remember, perhaps, telling us of Mrs Jenkins?"

"Yes, perfectly," said Badger, who looked uneasy, but not at all afraid of his foe.

"You said she eloped with Mr Bennett."

"I did say so, and I had good grounds for believing it. Of course I was mistaken. Is that your great discovery?"

"It is no discovery to me, for I never believed Bennett had done it. May I ask when you found out your mistake?"

"Oh, a few days ago. I can't say by which post the information reached me," replied Badger, carelessly.

"This is Wednesday. It is odd that Jenkins himself only learnt the truth on Monday afternoon, when he and Mr Bennett went to town together," rejoined Hardwicke, drily. "Of course," he continued, after a pause, "we all read with extreme annoyance a scandalous paragraph in 'Chit-Chat' respecting a lady and a certain anonymous writer named 'Z.'"

Badger glanced towards the door, but the colonel was sitting close to it, and there was evidence of startled attention on every face in the room.

"Mr Jenkins, on receipt of that anonymous letter, which referred him to the 'Chit-Chat' office, came to Stirling and saw, not 'Z.', but an emissary, who sent him to the Tillybodle manse, where his assertions respecting Bennett caused infinite pain. Mr Jenkins had no idea of 'Z.'s' identity, knew nothing of any lady intimate with Mr Bennett, and I will say for him,

could not, if he had tried, have written the underhand paragraph in question. Gentlemen, ‘Z.’ the emissary, and the paragraph-writer are one and the same, and there he stands !”

There was a stir, a murmur of indignation, and Badger, driven to bay, said hoarsely, “I defy you to prove all this—it is a pure invention !”

“Excuse me, *I* do not make unfounded accusations, Captain Badger. When you saw Jenkins, you wrote down this address for him. He kept it, and the gentlemen present can compare it with this envelope addressed by you to me. If more proof is required, I have only to wire for Mr Jenkins, who will be delighted to attend and identify you as the person he saw.”

“You can’t prove I wrote that paragraph, or the anonymous letter either,” said Badger, still making a stand.

“I have little doubt I can get proof of

the one at the 'Chit-Chat' office," began Hardwicke; but before he could say more, Harris stepped out from the window in which he had been sitting, and by the time he had uttered a dozen words Badger's face had changed from red to white—from bold defiance to shame and fear.

" You are fond of anonymous letters, Captain Badger. When we were on board ship, I did not know you were the man whom most of us heard of a few years ago. You wrote an anonymous letter once, on account of which you had to exchange. Whether you were thrashed or not for it, you know best. You were then in the —th."

" What! do you mean that the fellow was in the Villiers affair?" exclaimed the old colonel. Harris nodded.

" Good heavens, sir! it was lucky for you that the true version of that was never known. It was hushed up for the lady's

sake ; but *I* know it, sir ! You might have learnt your lesson then. No man can get off twice scot - free ! ” cried the colonel, shaking his stick in Badger’s face.

The wretched man did not utter a word, but walked across the room, every one drawing back from him as he went by ; and so, with the brand of the liar upon him, passed out of the club, and immediately afterwards out of the service and the knowledge of honest men.

Every one seemed to draw a breath of relief when he was gone, and comments were freely passed upon his conduct, while Hardwicke’s energy and perseverance were duly praised. Sir Duncan was careful that Bennett should not be forgotten, and the true account of Mrs Jenkins’s departure from Edinburgh was made known to most of the gentlemen present.

Hardwicke, in his satisfaction at this complete clearing up of the mystery that

had so long troubled him, would fain have carried off the whole of his audience to dinner; but such sudden and unpremeditated proceedings were incompatible with the grave dignity, or perhaps the household principles, of many of the party. Some, however, agreed to come—the old colonel among others.

"I've no womankind to consult," said he, with a smiling look at the county magnate, who, after stately excuses, was slowly retiring. "It's a great advantage at times to be a free agent."

"It's better to be a free agent because your womankind is rational," said another. "I have my freedom, and my home comforts too."

"But there are not many women like your wife. There are very few women who can bear to have dinner engagements made without notice. At least, I observe that my bachelor friends can always dine

with me impromptu, my married friends seldom or never," said the colonel.

"I believe I'm better off than either of you, for I have a sister who is always pleased with everything I do. She has no idea how many people are coming to-night, yet I warrant she'll be quite ready for you," said Hardwicke.

"Then she ought to marry. You've no business to deprive some one of such a wife," said the squire.

"Don't speak of such a thing! If she does, what am I to do? I wouldn't face marriage for the world."

"Oh, you'll be educated up to it by a series of household troubles, when Miss Hardwicke leaves you."

"May the day be far off!" said Hardwicke fervently, unaware that one of his guests was thinking very seriously over the merits of a woman who could receive with pleasure an uncertain number of visitors. "How

much of her readiness is owing to good temper, and how much to the possession of unlimited servants and money ?” he was asking himself, and the question was an ominous one for Hardwicke’s peace.

“It is owing to good temper—pure good temper,” he decided, as he entered the drawing-room, where Laura was waiting, radiant with pleasure.

She too had had a successful afternoon. She had driven over to Inverallan, and never doubting that the ladies knew of the meeting at that moment going on, began at once to speak of it. Greatly surprised at their ignorance, she told them rapidly all that she had learnt from her brother on the previous evening, and announced that she was going on to the manse in the hope of inducing Ronald to return with her to Broomieknowe.

“And I wish so very much you would come to dinner too, Miss Forbes; it would

be so pleasant for him, poor fellow, to find all his friends ready to welcome him, and show him that they never believed that horrid story. Won't you come?"

"With pleasure, Laura. You are very kind-hearted, my dear, and I shall be very glad to second your efforts," replied Miss Forbes.

"Oh, thank you—that is good of you! And you will come too, dear Mrs Leslie?" she said, turning anxiously to Muriel, who shook her head.

"I could not do it, Laura. You will have quite a large party perhaps, and indeed I am not equal to it."

"I was afraid you might not like it, but I am very sorry. Mr Bennett will miss you."

"I have no doubt he will be quite well contented. You and your brother have been so kind in this affair, he will be doubly pleased to see you," answered Muriel, some-

what stiffly. She did not relish Laura's words. That she should tell her that Ronald would miss her, seemed hardly fitting; and besides, how should Laura know his feelings in the matter at all?

"We must do our best to make up for your absence; and now I must hurry away to the manse."

Ronald had been at home for an hour, and had fully set his parents' minds at rest on the subject of Ellen Jenkins, as well as of the mysterious "Z." Mrs Bennett accepted the confirmation of her belief in him with quiet thankfulness, and settled herself cosily back in her arm-chair, as though to enjoy such repose as had not been hers since the sunny afternoon when the arrival of Jenkins had aroused her from her doze. For the last few days, indeed, the strain upon her had been great, and the relief was in proportion delightful.

His father had been greatly impressed

by Ronald's manly and simple statement of the facts; and when his *esprit de corps* prompted him to make a pitying observation on Badger, the minister emphatically expressed his belief that his son was a better man than himself, "For," said he, "I confess it to my shame, I have no present movement of compassion towards that unhappy wretch."

Such a speech could not fail to gratify Ronald, coming as it did from one who was by habit a severe judge. But it was of his mother that he chiefly thought; and as he sat by her, tenderly holding her hand, she considered herself repaid for all her anxiety. Into their happy quiet came Laura Hardwicke, a little shyer and more subdued than usual, for she had caught a glimpse of the two through the open window as she approached the house, and was touched by the expression of their faces.

"Dear Mrs Bennett, I am so glad!" said she, bending down; and then turning with her frank gaze to Ronald, she held out her hand.

"We are always congratulating you, Mr Bennett. I suppose before long we shall have to do it again when you hear the result of your examination?"

"I hope you may—if only that I may thank you again for your kindness," said the young man, who had heard from Ernest how warmly his sister had taken up his cause.

"I have come here with a request—I hope you will grant it. My brother is to bring a party of your friends out with him to dinner. Mr Harris, we hope, will stay with us. Miss Forbes, and probably Sir Duncan, will dine with us, and I want you to come and spend a few days. It would be such a pleasure to Ernest and Mr Harris."

"You are too good," said Ronald, with

a momentary hesitation. He perceived that Mrs Leslie was not coming, and Laura's quick glance saw the shadow in his eyes.

"I begged Mrs Leslie to come too," she said; "but she has not gone out much yet, you know, and we may be a large party."

Ronald's face cleared, and he glanced at his mother.

"Go, my dear boy; don't think of me. Indeed I am very tired, and shall be glad to rest quiet," said she, answering his look.

"Then I shall be delighted, Miss Hardwicke," replied Ronald; and in obedience to Laura's impetuous commands, he hurried off to make ready, leaving her with his mother.

"How happy you must feel to-day, Mrs Bennett! It is quite cheering to think of, after all you must have undergone."

“Yes, my dear; it is a great blessing to feel at ease again.”

“I am so ashamed when I think that we had that man in our house. It was much more my doing than Ernest’s. He never liked him; and I don’t think I really did either, only I was too lazy to make a stand about it.”

“Ah, that sort of laziness is never very safe—especially for a woman. You know the old saying—‘Be aye the same thing ye wad be ca’d.’ Never be friends with man or woman if you wouldn’t like to hear yourself called so.”

“You are quite right, Mrs Bennett. I think one gets into an idle way of being intimate with too many people.”

“You’re but young, my dear, to be alone so much without an older head to guide you.”

“Ah, I’m afraid ‘maidens and maukins are ill to steer,’ ” replied Laura, laughing; “but perhaps I shall be readier to take

advice for the future. Here is Mr Bennett, so I will go."

"Good-bye, my dear; come again and see me," said Mrs Bennett, for she was pleased with the girl's frankness.

"This is delightful," said Laura, as she drove rapidly homewards. "I had set my heart on having you with us, because it would be such a nice surprise for Ernest; and he deserves to enjoy himself after finding out the 'Z.' trick."

"Yes, indeed. My one feeling is of surprise that every one should be so good to me," said Ronald.

"You owe it to your honesty, Mr Bennett. As I told Mr Harris last night, you are always the same, and you never say silly things to ladies."

"Neither does Harris, I am sure."

"Oh yes, he does. But do you like him very much?" asked Laura, colouring a little.

“I think him a most excellent fellow, and he has certainly proved himself a stanch and kind friend.”

“Has he? Then Ernest will be very glad if he remains with us.”

Hardwicke was as pleased with Laura’s arrangements as she had expected that he would be; and as she had also secured the presence of two young ladies who lived near at hand, the impromptu dinner-party proved a gay one. The events of the afternoon were a topic of common interest; and when that was exhausted, the unanimity of feeling that they had occasioned prevented any relapse into formality, although some of the guests were almost strangers, and were introduced thus suddenly into an intimate circle.

Harris, it was discovered, had never seen Scotch reels danced; and as Miss Forbes played the music with admirable precision and spirit, a set was formed, and after some

persuasion Ronald was induced to stand up. Once compelled to begin, he gave himself up to the enjoyment of the moment, and in the whirl of the Houlachan, with Laura for a partner, felt gayer than he had done for many a day. Even Sir Duncan, looking on, joined in the joyous “Hoich !” and when the music ended, turned to Harris and asked him what he thought of it.

“Well, it’s music that would oblige one to dance, if one knew how,” said he; “it is wonderfully lively.”

“Lively !” exclaimed Ronald. “Is that all you can say ? I think there’s only one thing more stirring, and that’s a quick-step. A well-played reel sets one’s blood tingling—it just sparkles !”

“So it does, Ronald,” replied Sir Duncan. “You remind me of a German friend of mine to whom Alicia played, for the first time, some sad old Scotch airs. He was

listening with a very subdued face, when she broke suddenly into a reel, and he jumped up, exclaiming—‘That other music wept, but this cries in every note, Dance!’”

“If I were to stay a while in Scotland, do you think I could learn to dance reels, Miss Hardwicke ?” asked Harris.

“Of course you could ; it is quite easy,” said Laura, who, having learnt in the nursery, did not reflect that “cover the buckle” would not come so naturally to older ankles.

“Is it ? I thought some of the steps looked very mysterious, but I would do my best to learn if you could arrange the lessons.”

“Certainly ; there’s a piper at one of our farms who would teach you capitally,” replied Laura, with a malicious sparkle in her eyes.

“Oh, I’m afraid I shan’t be here long enough to learn—from the piper,” returned

he demurely, but Laura slipped away without replying.

"When are you coming over to us, Ronald ? I am quite jealous of the Hardwickes for keeping you here," said Sir Duncan.

They were standing in a doorway, where Ronald had gone for cooler air, and as for the moment no one was within hearing, he turned anxiously to his old friend.

"Tell me, Sir Duncan, has Mrs Leslie been very much annoyed ? That is an absurd question, for she must have been so ; I should rather say, has she forgiven me ?"

"For what ?"

"For being the cause of that paragraph, however unintentionally. That her name, of all others, should be even hinted at in such a paper, was more painful to me than I can tell you."

"My dear boy, Muriel could not be so

unreasonable as to blame you for that ; it was in no sense your fault."

"No, but it is a disagreeable episode that she will associate with me."

"I think you misjudge her in that."

Ronald looked again at his companion for an instant, and was satisfied with neither his voice nor his words.

"Be frank with me, Sir Duncan. I am sure Mrs Leslie is annoyed. She has sent me no message to-night ; yet a few months ago, I think, under the circumstances, she would have done so."

"I will be frank, Ronald, for I wish you to be so with me. You are right in thinking that something is amiss, but what it is I cannot tell you. Muriel is under the impression that in some way you have not been altogether straightforward with her, and she cannot get over it. Can't you clear away the misunderstanding, whatever it is ?"

"Not unless she will explain it, Sir Duncan. There is only one point, so far as I know, on which I have not been perfectly open with her, and on that subject my lips are closed. But though I have been silent, I have nothing worse to accuse myself of."

"Come over and tell her so."

Ronald paused to reflect a moment, and shook his head. "Forgive me for saying so, Sir Duncan, but I cannot do that. I have been foolish enough to fancy that, after all these years, Mrs Leslie might have trusted me a little, as you did. I felt that I owed her the profoundest apologies for the insult I brought upon her, and I almost dreaded to meet her because of it. But if she can think that I am not straightforward, or that I have in any way dealt unfairly by her, I think my presence in her drawing-room would be a mistake."

There was a simple dignity about Ronald

as he said this that became him well ; and Sir Duncan, as he listened, felt almost angry with his daughter.

"The very best of women will have their crotchets occasionally, Ronald ; but I cannot say I think you wrong. The loss will be mine—but not for long, I hope. Muriel's good sense will show itself in time."

"You may be sure the loss is mine too," said Ronald, sadly, and for a while he was grave and silent ; but Hardwicke rallied him, and Laura drew him skilfully back into the conversation, and his pride, newly awakened by Muriel's mistrust, enabled him to fling himself once more into the gaiety of the hour.

Muriel was still in the drawing-room when her father and aunt reached home. She had a book in her hand, and a softly shaded reading-lamp at her side, but she looked tired and uninterested ; the volume, it seemed, had not been well chosen. Miss

Forbes, as she entered—the floss silk embroidery on her white cloak shining in the lamplight—looked almost brilliant beside her pale and weary niece.

“I am quite sorry you were not with us, Muriel—we have had such a pleasant evening; every one seemed so bright, especially Mr Bennett. Laura said she never knew him more delightful, and she was enjoying herself thoroughly.”

“Indeed, aunt, I am glad to hear it; you are not often so well pleased with a dinner-party.”

“I don’t wonder she is pleased to-night,” said Sir Duncan, coming quickly into the room, “for the brother and sister looked so happy, that every one else was forced to follow suit. They danced a reel or two in order that that very agreeable friend of Ronald’s might see them; and upon my word, I found myself crying ‘Hoich’ like the rest of them!”

"How well Mr Bennett dances! so quietly and neatly."

"Yes, he is a dancer of the old school, and reminds me of old Glendonach, who used to dance a reel with a penny on his head without dropping it. There are very few nowadays who could do that. Men kick and yell at a reel, as though noise and clumsiness were the great thing."

"And then it is no wonder that strangers call it a barbarous display," said Miss Alicia.

"Ronald is going to remain at Broomieknowe for the present. Hardwicke has very kindly asked his friend Harris to stay and see something of the country. I hope he will come over here also."

"I suppose Ronald will bring him," said Muriel, with a slight effort.

"Oh, he is sure to do so," said Miss Alicia, taking her bedroom candle and bidding her niece good-night.

"Stay a moment, my dear," said Sir Duncan, as Muriel also rose to go, and she resumed her place.

"I had a word or two with Ronald tonight, and he will certainly not bring Mr Harris here, though the Hardwickes may do so."

"Why not?" inquired Muriel, with some surprise.

"Because I think he feels that you are scarcely just to him," answered her father, proceeding to repeat what had passed between him and Ronald.

"Do you not see, papa, that he admitted that there was one subject on which he had not been open?"

"My dear girl, he distinctly said he had only been silent, not that he had failed in straightforwardness. One would think that you expected to be informed of all his private thoughts and affairs."

"I know that is how the thing presents

itself to you, papa. I feel differently about it myself, because I know precisely what he said to me."

"Then at least you should ask him to explain whatever it is that has perplexed you. You are acting in a way that is most unlike your usual good sense, Muriel," replied her father.

"I am very sorry. And I do not see why Ronald should not come here and visit you as he used to do."

"Because he has some pride and self-respect, my dear," said Sir Duncan, drily. "It is unfortunate, as I have no doubt people will say we have quarrelled with him about the Jenkins business."

"Oh, that must not be, papa!"

"It will be, unless you write and invite him to come here."

"There's another alternative, papa; I can go to Ardenshaugh next week instead of in a fortnight. The Leslies will like it

just as well, and then people could not say anything disagreeable."

"You had better write and arrange it, then. I shall certainly be annoyed if any needless ground is given for gossip," returned Sir Duncan; and his daughter wished him a graver good-night than usual, and hastened to her own room.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HEARTS IN THE HIGHLANDS.

BREAKFAST at Broomieknowe was a cheerful meal, neither too hurried nor too long. It was never formal, for the servants were banished, and yet there were so many happy arrangements,—such dumb-waiters, and convenient side-tables, and dainty hot-water dishes,—that no one was put to more trouble than was agreeable.

Harris was delighted with the whole proceeding. If he was ever really talkative, it was over this meal, and he fell at once into the ways of friendly intimacy that seemed natural to the house.

“We must take you up to Loch Katrine,

Harris," said Hardwicke. " You don't mind lionising a little ? "

" Not in such good company, and provided the sights are all out of doors. I confess I don't like to be taken to see buildings."

" And I was just going to propose Doune Castle as our lion for to-day !" remarked Laura.

" Please don't, Miss Hardwicke. Why should we go and look at old rooms, just because they were the residence of a by-gone generation ? " said Harris, who was not a man of cultured taste.

" But these rooms have been used by historical people, not merely by commonplace owners. You forget that we are in the centre of a district full of associations for Scotch people."

" And besides, from the tower of Doune you have one of the finest views of the hills," said Ronald.

“Then I surrender, Miss Hardwicke. You shall take me to Doune and lead me up the tower; and if I may be allowed to see some of the battle-fields that are in the neighbourhood, I shall like it.”

“So you shall, and to-morrow we will go to the lochs. You know that in Scotland, of all places, one should make hay while the sun shines. The weather is not to be trusted.”

“Ah! It’s like a lady’s temper, uncertain, and apt to be stormy,” said Harris.

“Mr Harris! It is like your masculine injustice to take advantage of your position. You are three to one,” said Laura.

“I would not rate a lady’s power so low as to suppose her equal to only one of us, Miss Hardwicke, and in this case I am already vanquished; so the odds—if there are any—are on your side.”

“It seems to me you are being beaten with your own weapons, Laura, for you

have not even had the last word," remarked Hardwicke.

"Then if I am defeated, I cannot be expected to lead the way to Doune. It would not be fitting," rejoined Laura.

"I don't know that. The vanquished must be made to precede the victors, eh, Harris?"

"Then Miss Hardwicke will drive me to Doune."

"Very well, Mr Harris : you shall precede me—on the front seat of the carriage," replied Laura ; and turning to Ronald, she proposed that Mrs Bennett should accompany them.

Ronald thought a drive would do his mother good, and said he would walk over after breakfast and see her about it; whereupon Harris proposed to accompany him, as he was anxious to take an early opportunity of calling. Ronald assented, and the two set out immediately, leaving Hardwicke to his usual avocations.

"What a capital house this is, Bennett!" said his friend, as soon as they were outside the doors.

"It is a very pleasant house, and I think growing pleasanter."

"What do you mean?"

"Miss Hardwicke is much improved of late. She is less flighty, and quieter, as though she were settling down a bit," replied Ronald.

"You seem to be on excellent terms with them both," remarked Harris, glancing at him.

"They have been kindness itself to me from the first," rejoined Ronald, and he told his companion of the meeting in the Edinburgh dining-room.

"I wonder you never thought of marrying Miss Hardwicke, though perhaps I am mistaken in saying so," answered Harris, abruptly.

Ronald replied, with evident surprise,

"Such an idea never crossed my mind for a moment. I should think Hardwicke would consider it very impertinent were I to propose it. She is an heiress, and I have nothing but my pay."

"I should think, however, that if Miss Hardwicke approved, he would give way."

"It is not likely she would. Besides, there's no need for me to beat about the bush with you, Harris ; I would not marry her if I could."

"Is it a case of some one else, old fellow ?" replied his companion, in a cordial voice.

"Yes. And as the some one else is out of my reach, I am a bachelor for life."

"Don't be too sure of that. I should have said the same the day before yesterday; but upon my word, if I stay long here, I won't answer for myself!"

"You don't say so ! Well, if your trip here procures you a good wife, I shan't regret having brought you."

" You need not do so in any case, for the place is well worth coming to," returned Harris.

Mrs Bennett was gathering fresh flowers in the garden when the gentlemen arrived ; and as she led the way to the house, with her basket of roses and carnations on her arm, Ronald looked at her with affectionate pride. Her tall figure, clad, as usual, in soft, dark material ; her smooth white hair, half hidden by a black garden-hat ; her bright eyes, which looked the brighter for the delicate colour in her cheek ; her pleasant smile, and even the fine Shetland scarf wound about her neck and shoulders,—made a picture that an artist might have studied, and that Harris saw with evident admiration. She received him, too, so simply and kindly—thanking him in a few words for the sympathy he had shown to her son, and then leading the talk to the places of interest that he was likely to visit.

"Will you not stay to luncheon? You are not going away at once, Ronald?" she said, when he rose to leave.

"I'm afraid we must, mother. You see we must let Miss Hardwicke know about sending the carriage for you."

"Ah yes; I forgot that. I will be ready at three, and I hope you will bring Mr Harris to lunch another day. We do not give dinner-parties, Mr Harris; we are very quiet people, you know."

"I shall be delighted to come to lunch, Mrs Bennett; dinners are usually a bore. We shall meet again this afternoon," said he, smiling, and left the house—Mrs Bennett, who had not filled her flower-basket, accompanying them to the door.

While Ronald said a final word to her, Harris observed a lady in deep mourning turning in at the gate by which they had entered. He thought his friend had not seen her, and as he rather hastily said,

"We'll go out by this farther gate, Harris," and took a path which led to the back of the house, they did not meet.

"Who was that very beautiful woman who was coming in as we left? She was slight, and in deep mourning. You did not see her."

"Yes, I did," replied Ronald; "that was Mrs Leslie."

It was with a sharp pang that Muriel saw her old friend hasten away from the door of the home in which they had passed so many pleasant hours together, in order to avoid her. It hurt alike her pride and her heart that it should be so, and yet she could not bring herself to make the slight concession that was required to win him back. If she were to write and invite him to Inverallan, as her father evidently wished that she should do, the little difference between them must be definitely settled in one way or another. Could she, she asked

herself, meet Ronald with the same open cordiality that she evinced towards him a couple of months ago ? Could she persuade herself that she had made a foolish, a childish mistake—for as such her father clearly regarded it—and forget it altogether ? No ; whatever happened, *that* was impossible. He had distinctly, in answer to her simple question, declared that he did not know where any of his old friends were, and at that very time he must have heard from Mrs Jenkins.

The only other alternative was to remind him of his remark, and beg him to explain it. That was equally impossible. In what words could she say to him, “Ronald, I think you have told me an untruth ; will you retract it ?” Even supposing she could summon courage to say such a thing, would not the position be ten times worse than before ? Assuredly it would—for he must either confess and stand ashamed before

her, or repeat his fault; and she shrank from the very idea of either contingency.

She remembered, moreover, what he had said on the previous evening to Sir Duncan, and his words confirmed her suspicions. Surely the one subject on which his lips were to be closed to her, must be this very matter of his friendship, his love, perhaps his first engagement, to Mrs Jenkins. She could well understand that he should shrink from any allusion to what had been seemingly a somewhat discreditable chapter in his life. She was heartily glad that he had come so well out of the suspicious circumstances that attended his journey to London; but unless there were truth in what she had heard of a previous tie between him and Mrs Jenkins, that unfortunate woman would hardly have thrown herself so suddenly and with such confidence into his hands.

" You have just missed Ronald and his

friend Mr Harris, Muriel. I wish you had seen them," said Mrs Bennett, coming out of the porch, where she had stopped to fasten up a long spray of trumpet-honey-suckle.

"Is Mr Harris staying too at Broomieknowe?"

"Yes, the Hardwickes are most hospitable. I am glad Ronald is to be there all this week—the change will do him good; and then he is such a favourite there."

"I have no doubt he will enjoy it."

"Do you know, I think Laura is greatly improved—she was so natural and pleasant when she came here to fetch him, and spoke very nicely to me when we were alone for a moment, about Captain Badger. She regrets now that she knew him."

"It would have been better had she had keener eyes when she first met him. I cannot understand how she could tolerate his vulgarity for an hour," said Muriel.

"Ah, my dear, she does not come of the same folk as you do. Remember that Laura's childhood was spent in a very different house to Broomieknowe; and therefore one must not be hard upon her."

"Of course, that makes a difference. Still, I think that she might have shown better taste in many ways."

"Her mother died just when she needed her most, my dear; but I think she is learning the lessons she needs, and is not ashamed to say so," replied mamsie, with intention, or at least Muriel fancied so.

They had talked for a while on other matters before Mrs Bennett mentioned her intended drive.

"I am going out to-day, and not with you,—is not that extraordinary?" said she, for it was usually in Muriel's company that she went for a drive.

"Indeed! Where are you going?"

"To Doune Castle, with the Broomie-

knowe party. Laura sent Ronald over this morning to propose it. It was thoughtful of her. I daresay she guessed that it is a treat to me to see my boy happy among his friends."

"I am very glad you are going, and that the day is so fine, mamsie," said Muriel, kissing her; and she took her solitary way homewards with a little feeling of envy. It seemed that the Hardwicks were everything at the manse just now, and that Laura and Ronald were on more intimate terms than she had supposed. It was the result, no doubt, of the strong interest, the very outspoken interest, that Laura had taken in him of late. He must, of course, feel grateful to her for it; and he was one to express his gratitude by deeds, daily attentions, and a constant friendship, rather than by words. Well, it would perhaps be a good thing for both of them if this new friendship were to ripen into something

more. Ronald would be the gainer of a fortune; and if Mrs Bennett were taking a fancy to Laura, that also would be well. Having thus settled her friends' affairs in a way that ought to have given her perfect satisfaction, Muriel went in to luncheon.

Here again, however, the tenor of conversation was less even than usual. Sir Duncan was silent, and his sister and daughter knew that such a silence was the only indication that he ever gave of vexation and annoyance. Miss Alicia was quite in the dark as to its cause, and during the earlier part of the meal directed expressive glances of inquiry at her niece, as though to discover if she were better informed.

She soon perceived that something was amiss with Muriel herself, and finished her coffee-cream in the state of curiosity and perplexity into which she was now apt to fall if the slightest difficulty or most trifling

accident occurred to disturb her companions in their habitual calm.

"Muriel," said Sir Duncan at last, "you spoke of going over to the Gordons some day; when do you think of arranging it?"

"I do not know, papa; I had not thought about it."

"Can you make Friday suit? I understand Mr Harris only remains this week at Broomieknowe, and I should like to have them all over here."

"Very well, papa; I will go on Friday. They said they could take me any day."

"But, Muriel—Duncan—what do you mean? You are not going to ask the Hardwickes on Friday!" exclaimed Miss Alicia.

"The fact is, Alicia, Muriel has taken up some prejudice against young Bennett, and he very properly refuses to come here as long as this is the case. Now as I do not wish gossip to say that we have quarrelled

since the Jenkins business, I mean to have him here in some way or other."

"Dear, dear, what a pity! Very right of you, Duncan—it is a pity to encourage gossip; and, Muriel, how strange of you, just when Mr Bennett has been so satisfactorily cleared from all imputations too—so very strange that you should turn against him!"

"Pray, do not let us talk of that, dear aunt. I can easily absent myself for a night this week; and when I am with the Leslie's, Mr Bennett can come here every day, if the Hardwickes can spare him," said Muriel, with enforced gentleness. She felt hurt, and almost angry, at the total lack of sympathy shown her on this subject, and at her father's desire to send her away. Never in her life before had such a thing been said to her, and the tears rose to her eyes as she left the dining-room to write the requisite note to her friend Mrs Gordon.

Sir Duncan also wrote and despatched a couple of notes ; one to Hardwicke, inviting him to bring his whole party to spend the day—and another to Ronald, which ran as follows : “ My dear Ronald,—I want particularly to see you, and as my daughter will be away on Friday, you need not hesitate to come. It will be a pity if people fancy we have quarrelled ; therefore pray do not excuse yourself.—Yours, D. F.”

On Thursday the proposed expedition from Broomieknowe to the lochs was carried out successfully. It was one of those wondrous days of warm sunshine when objects along the shore and on the level ground are seen with strange uncertainty through the quivering air—when the rocks on the hillsides look black against the yellow light, and the eye, wearied with the dazzling blaze of sunshine across the water, turns away with relief to the cooler east. There we can see that the verdant slopes

are broad and fair, and that birch and rowan and oaken copse clothe the broken ground ; while higher still, with bold crests reared above the humbler hills, rise the mountains, whose tints of purple and breadth of blue can hardly be matched elsewhere.

England has her undulating downs, whose tender greys and yellows a Fielding loved to paint ; Wales has her rugged ranges, whose steep sides hem in sparkling tarn and foaming fall ; but never among these do the colours spread themselves with as rich a beauty, nor does nature wear so varied an aspect, as in the magic region that lies “aboon the Pass.”

Each of the party from Broomieknowe appreciated the loveliness of the scene in characteristic fashion. Hardwicke became tranquil under its influence, recognising the charm of its general aspect, and allowing himself to be soothed by it, even while

he confessed humbly that there was something wonderful about it all, and that other people saw much in it that was beyond his range of vision.

Laura, on the contrary, was exhilarated by the abundant life and light about her, and could not restrain her exclamations of delight as their boat shot across the shining water, and fresh glimpses of glen and copse and burn opened to view. When they landed, she would hardly wait to partake of the luncheon which they had brought, before attempting the ascent of the nearest hill.

"You will be half dead from the heat, Laura. You'll get sunstroke in going up, and then we shall get sunstroke in carrying you down," said Hardwicke, as he took a bottle of champagne carefully out of the ice and drew the cork.

"Not a bit of it. How can you spend your time over lunch when there's such a

view within a few hundred yards of you? I always want to see what's on the other side of a hill."

"Mountains are meant for surmounting, in your eyes, Miss Hardwicke; but do look at this salad for a moment—won't you condescend to wait and share it?" said Harris, holding out a cool and creamy *mayonnaise*.

"I suppose I must, for I'm sure you will leave me none, and it *is* very hot," said Laura, dropping on her knees in a tuft of hay-scented ferns. "Nevertheless I am going to climb that hill by-and-by."

She looked so handsome and bright as she said it, kneeling there among the long green fronds, some of which she had fastened in her hat as an additional shade, that Harris and Ronald vied with each other in their efforts to please and amuse her.

By - and - by her brother begged her to sing to them, and without hesitation she began one of the wild old ballads that lend

themselves so perfectly to such a time and place. Her clear, high Scotch voice was well suited to the music, and she sang with a depth of pathos and power of expression with which Ronald would not have credited her, and which surprised even her brother. Perhaps her gay heart was becoming susceptible to new impressions that uttered themselves unawares in her song.

The ballad was one that pleased Ronald well, especially in his present mood. To him these hills and glens were dear, for the sake of the traditions that hung about them, and haunted crag and dell. Here his kinsfolk in olden days had lived, had been hunted by their foes, had fought and died ; and something of their fiery spirit stirred in his breast as he sat, slightly apart from his companions, and listened to the familiar strain.

As though to complete the spell, Laura had but ended her song when the distant

strain of a *piobaireachd* struck upon their ears; and as it came nearer and nearer, rising and falling as rock and knoll caught and threw back the sound, Harris wondered to see his friends start to their feet and listen with keen faces and quickened breathing to the gathering that had so often summoned warriors to the field. Even he was moved, as the hurrying notes throbbed faster and faster; and when at last the solitary player, now visible on a distant beach, had ended his rapid music, and turning, wandered away as he had come, the slow wail of his Lament growing fainter and fainter, he was forced to confess that there was a weird power in the strain, such as he had never recognised in music before.

Ronald drew a hard breath as he exclaimed, "By Jove, no wonder fellows can fight who are brought up to that music and among these hills!"

Laura's kindling glance told her sym-

pathy without words, and Harris almost envied him as he looked at her radiant face.

"I suppose it is in keeping with the scenery," he remarked, "though I confess the effect that such places produce upon me is of a different kind. I shall never forget my first impressions of the hills in India. I might almost say they made me feel romantic."

"In what way?" inquired Laura.

"Oh, one felt rather a pygmy, you know; and some things struck one in a different light—things that one is apt to scoff at in ordinary life. Very absurd, isn't it?" he answered, in the shy way in which men sometimes admit that they have been stirred out of their everyday indifference.

"I don't think it at all absurd," said Laura, gravely; but Harris would not speak further of himself, and asked her if she were not going to commence her intended climb.

"No, my ambition is gone, tamed for this afternoon."

"By the *mayonnaise?*" inquired her brother, demurely.

"No, by the music, and perhaps the heat. But I am going to stroll along the loch and dig up some ferns, so I will leave you to your beloved pipes. Smoke is out of place here," she replied, moving away as she spoke.

The pipes were lit accordingly; but one at least of the smokers was silent and thoughtful, and from his seat at the foot of a boulder enamelled with yellow and grey lichens, his glance followed the retreating figure in the dark-blue dress, pausing to search some cranny, or stooping to dig a root from the centre of some mossy tuft.

By - and - by he rose and knocked the ashes from his pipe. "I see Miss Hardwicke returning with a full basket. I shall

go and carry it for her," he said ; and he leapt down the little ledge that divided them from the shore.

"Do you know anything of Harris's people ?" said Hardwicke, a little gravely, to his companion.

"Nothing," replied Ronald, "except that they live in a small country - house in Sussex, and that he is the eldest son."

"He's a pleasant fellow," replied Ernest, and relapsed into silence. For the first time to-day, the idea had crossed him that Laura thought the same, and that a great change might be impending over his own future. He looked at her curiously as she and Harris returned, and apparently the idea gathered strength, for he gave a little sigh as he began to pack the picnic basket ; and whether from fatigue, or from the nature of their thoughts, the whole party was somewhat subdued and quiet during their return home.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

“HAPPY’S THE WOOING THAT’S NOT LONG
OF DOING.

ON their arrival at Broomieknowe after the trip to the Trosachs, Ronald found Sir Duncan’s note awaiting him.

“Will this suit you for to-morrow?” said he. “Sir Duncan asks us all to go over early and spend the day. That will probably mean a walk up the Witch’s Glen.”

“Admirably,” replied Hardwicke; while Harris added that he would be glad to see Sir Duncan again—“He is a charming old gentleman; and I suppose I shall see his beautiful daughter, of whom I have heard so much.”

"Mrs Leslie will be away," said Ronald quietly, and took no notice of the little pause and look of surprise on the faces of the brother and sister.

They knew that he and Muriel had not met since his return ; and now it appeared so strange that she should be absent on the very day that he was asked to Inverallan, that they both wondered if anything were amiss. Neither liked to make any inquiry, and Harris's regrets were but faintly echoed by Laura.

The weather on the next day was again favourable ; and Sir Duncan was, under all circumstances, an agreeable host. The Bennetts walked up from the manse to luncheon, and the arrival of some neighbours for a call added to the party. Sir Duncan himself conducted Harris to the inevitable picture-gallery, and by his genial conversation almost induced him to forget that Laura remained in the drawing-room.

In the afternoon a carriage took them to the gate of the footpath which led up to the Witch's Glen. This glen formed a curious chasm in the hill, and the burn that descended from it fed the little waterfall near the village, where Ronald and Muriel had been wont to play. The path was steep, and needed wary walking, for it was cut with difficulty along the face of the rock, or over treacherous banks of red earth, where in spring the primroses flowered thick and sweet.

After scrambling along for some distance, they reached a deep black pool, hollowed out among the surrounding crags. Here no foot could pass, and no sound broke the stillness save the slow drip of the water from a tiny spring hidden under a fringe of polished hart's-tongue fronds.

"What an uncomfortable place!" said Harris, looking round. "This is a veritable haunt of witches."

"I am afraid the witch here was a most unromantic and wicked old woman. We can go up to her eyrie presently, and return by a better path," said Ronald.

"What was her history?"

"In old days a drove-road from the Highlands passed near her cottage, and the drovers used to shelter there at times when the nights were dark and wet. Little by little it was remarked that they did not always reach home afterwards, and that those who did so were invariably men who had had bad luck at the market. Suspicion pointed to old Nancy's cottage as the last place where more than one poor fellow, on his way home with a good purse of gold in his pocket, had been heard of. Nothing could be proved, however; but in spite of her protests, the drovers would take their tired cattle on for miles sooner than stop with the witch, as she was called. In time she died—killed by a dose of her own

drugged drinks—and in a chink among the stones of her cottage was found a bag of gold. Some one bethought them of searching this pool, and enough bones were dragged up to show where many a poor lad had been put out of sight."

"What a ghastly story, Bennett! I declare it spoils the beauty of the place altogether."

"You see, to us the whole countryside teems with such tales," replied Ronald. "There is old Nancy's cottage," and he pointed to what was now hardly more than "a rickle o' stanes"—all that was left of the abode that had once covered such dark deeds.

Harris was on the whole disappointed with his walk. He thought the narrow glen gloomy and chill, and the stretch of moor above it—where the bent was yellow and burnt, and the heather was not yet in bloom, and where the melancholy whaups

uttered their long cry, and the old stony drove-road wound away across the swampy ground — a dismal and depressing place. Perhaps his feeling may have been due in part to the preference evinced by Laura for Ronald's society. The ladies needed constant assistance during their climb ; but in spite of his efforts to bring about a different arrangement, it was Ronald's hand that guided her from rock to rock, and on Ronald's shoulder that she had leant when they slowly skirted the dangerous pool. A bright and pleasant girl, one of the callers who had joined them, fell to his own share, but she could not console him for his loss.

That night, when Hardwicke had established his guests in the smoking-room, and had returned to the library to write some of his neglected letters, his sister came softly into the room.

“ Ernest,” she said, coming up behind him, and leaning on his shoulder so that

he could not see her face, "I want you to send the carriage very early to-morrow with a note to aunt Anne, and beg her to come and stay here for the next few days."

"My dear Laura, what is the meaning of this? You know you hate an odd number at table—why spoil our quartette?" he exclaimed, trying to turn round and look at her; but she held him, and leant her cheek on his hair, saying coaxingly—

"Now there's a dear brother—don't ask any questions, because I really shouldn't know how to answer them. I don't myself know why I want her, but I do."

"Very well, dear; I will write at once. What shall I say? It must be something of this sort, I suppose: 'Dear aunt Anne, Laura wants you; she doesn't know why, and—'"

"And then she wouldn't come. She'll only come to please you."

"Then I'll say, 'Please come and take

care of Laura, who is afraid somebody is falling in love——”

“Oh !” Laura’s hands were over his mouth, and the blush deepened on her cheeks. Then she murmured in imploring tones that she didn’t want to be teased, and that Ernest must not be unkind, which word immediately vanquished him.

“My pet, the carriage shall go at day-break if you like,—that is about four o’clock, I suppose,—and I will write the prettiest of notes to go with it.”

“Thank you, you good brother—good-night,” replied the girl, kissing him; and she hurried away so as scarcely to allow him to get a glimpse of her face. He shook his head as the door closed. “Things are more serious than I supposed,” thought he. “I never in my life before saw Laura shy.”

The note to aunt Anne was written in discreet terms, and a brougham sent in with it next morning at as early an hour as was

possible without creating an alarm in the little house in which she lived.

Aunt Anne—otherwise Miss Hardwicke—was the only sister of Ernest Hardwicke's father, and had profited greatly by her brother's rise in life. She herself had been the matron of a public school, and was yearly laying by a modest sum, when he made the discovery which in a few years enabled him to purchase Broomieknowe.

As soon as he was in possession of a fair fortune, he set about providing for his sister, and to that end bought her a little villa and garden on the outskirts of Stirling, where, as he told her, she could grow her kail and feed her fowls, and drink her cup of tea in her own arbour.

Aunt Anne was supremely happy in her little domain, and steadily refused the proposals made to her by suitors who considered her a very eligible person. She had her ambitions gratified : always wore black

silk on Sabbaths, and fine merinos of a week-day afternoon. She was held in consideration by the minister, and looked up to by the two servants that her brother insisted she should keep; while for her nephew Ernest she entertained a passionate affectionate. With Laura she was not on such good terms. Indeed there had once been a serious quarrel between them when the girl said scornfully that she need not surely talk to the guests at Broomieknowe of the days when she worked for her living. This, however, was some years ago, and of late Laura had been in greater favour.

A spruce little old lady she looked, in her black-silk mantle and claret-coloured merino, as she walked into the dining-room at Broomieknowe, where breakfast had that moment been placed upon the table.

“ Well, my bairns, here I am, you see, though you sent at such an hour. How are you, Laura? I’m glad breakfast’s ready, for

an early drive has given me an appetite. My dear, you'll have to drive me in again to-morrow at furthest, for I just minded that I haven't given the lassies their tea for the incoming week, nor left an order to stop my French rolls, and it would be needless wastry to let the lassies eat them. I can't write to the baker, for he's a doited body, and never reads a letter right."

In the midst of this stream of talk, Miss Hardwicke dropped quite naturally into the place at Laura's right hand ; and Harris, who was approaching the same chair with a plate of cold tongue in his hand, paused behind her, discomfited.

"Was this your place, sir ?" said she, without looking round. "I am sorry to put you out."

"Oh, not at all," murmured Harris.

"You needn't say that, sir. Gentlemen like their ways and their places ; but you're young enough to give in to an old woman

like me—and I aye sit by the tea-maker. Now, Laura, my dear, a drop of hot water in my cup first, if you please."

"What an alarming old woman!" said Harris to Ronald, after breakfast. "How the deuce could she tell I wanted that place, or that I looked put out? She never even turned her head."

"Miss Anne sees everywhere. You'd better make up your mind to that. She's as sharp as a needle, but as true as the steel it's made of."

"Humph! It strikes me we were very comfortable without her," grumbled Harris; and Ronald laughed, for it amused him to watch the steps by which his friend was gradually plunging deeper and deeper into the waters of love.

Miss Anne was less in the way than he had expected. Whether Hardwicke had warned her, or whether she had divined the state of the case, Laura did not know; but

in an hour or two she was, so to speak, mistress of the situation,—and fortunately for her niece, she approved of it.

"You were a wise lassie, my dear, to send for me; and you needn't put yourself about about the drive to Stirling. I'll send the money for the tea, and not heed though the lassies do eat French rolls for a whilie. The like of that doesn't count when there's matters of this sort going on. He's a fine honest face, my dear, though he is an Englishman; and I'll just be about when you want me, and out of the way when you don't."

"Oh, aunt Anne, how comfortable you are!" cried Laura, giving her a grateful kiss; and she no longer avoided Harris as she had done yesterday, but played lawn-tennis with him, and to his immense gratification gave him a lovely rosebud for his buttonhole before dinner.

It was true that she gave similar ones

to Ronald and to her brother; but Harris flattered himself that she had picked out the finest for him, and he was not wrong in thinking so.

The last evening of his stay came, and he had not been able to determine whether he should speak or no. He had easily been persuaded to outstay the time originally proposed for his visit; and Ronald having returned home, he had now been alone with the Hardwickes for three or four days. Sometimes he fancied that Laura would accept him, and the ready words rushed to his lips; but then again he imagined her colder, and thought that her cordiality was only such as she would naturally show to a guest.

In spite, however, of these momentary doubts, a love so happily watched over and waited for by the lady's natural guardians could not fail to run a tranquil course. On that last evening, Hardwicke

was summoned to his business-room to see a tenant, and Miss Anne was somehow conveniently out of the way for a few minutes.

Laura was diligently occupied with her crewel-work, and, left thus alone with Harris, could not originate a single remark. He, however, broke the silence, which she was beginning to feel terribly oppressive.

"Do you remember warning me never to make pretty speeches?" he said, suddenly.

"Yes, I do."

"And I promised never to make another."

"Yes." How absurd it was that she could only reply in monosyllables!

"I am a man of my word, and therefore I may claim to be believed when I say, in earnest, not as a compliment, that this visit has been the happiest time in my life."

"I am very glad you have enjoyed yourself."

"I wish I might hope to repeat it."

"I am sure my brother will be happy to see you."

"Your brother? And am I to infer that you will not be glad to see me here again?"

"I did not say so," murmured Laura.

"Then you will welcome me if I come back? It must be one thing or the other. Tell me the truth, just in one word, yes or no."

"Yes."

"Have I won the prize I dreamed of, then? Or have I given all my love in vain?—tell me, Laura."

"You have won."

It was a very faint whisper, but it was enough; and when aunt Anne, with a singular amount of bustle for such a quiet old lady, entered the outer drawing-room, Harris kept his place on the sofa till she reached the door, when he advanced towards her and said, with a quiet smile, "Aunt Anne, will you come and talk to Laura? she says she cannot leave her brother."

Whereupon aunt Anne, standing on tip-toe, kissed him, and patted him on the shoulder, saying, "Certainly, my dear; Laura must not be allowed to talk any such nonsense;" and Laura, between tears and laughter, said they were a ridiculous pair, and ran away to intercept Ernest on his way in to tea.

No one congratulated the lovers more heartily than Ronald Bennett. A note was despatched to him next morning, and he came immediately to offer his good wishes to his friends. The marriage was to take place without delay, and Laura was to spend some weeks thereafter in making the acquaintance of her new relations.

Harris was not a penniless suitor—for his father was a retired barrister who had become heir to a pretty house with a small park and a single farm—and as Laura's portion was a large one, they had every

prospect of a comfortable future. He insisted that Ronald should be best man, remarking that he owed his bride in a sense to him, as, but for the great "Z." trick, he would never have seen her. Ronald willingly consented, provided he were in the country, which was doubtful, in the face of the new complications that had arisen in one of the colonies. His health was now fully restored, and if the 2d were to be again on service, he must, of course, rejoin them immediately.

It was a great shock to Mrs Bennett when she realised the new sorrow that was hanging over her; but she rallied bravely, and said that she had come to have faith in her son's future, and believed that he would return to her yet again.

His expectations were soon proved to be correct, and the day on which he stood behind his friend and saw Laura married,

was the last he spent in Scotland. And during this time Muriel was at Ardenshaugh, and had never seen her old friend's face.

On her way back from the short visit to her friends the Gordons, which had enabled Sir Duncan to invite him to Inverallan, she had taken a sudden resolve, which she put rapidly into execution, her father raising no objection when she proposed it to him. She was to have gone to Ardenshaugh in August, but it would not matter to the Leslies if she hastened her visit by a few weeks, for whenever she chose to go there she was sure of a welcome. She wrote, therefore, that it would suit better with other plans if she were to come immediately; and on receipt of their reply she began to pack up.

"Dear, dear," said aunt Alicia, plaintively, "it is really most extraordinary! You seem to be quite changed of late,

Muriel. I think you are growing self-willed."

"Perhaps I am, aunt. I think I want a change. I shall be fresher and in better spirits when I return."

"I hope so, my dear—I hope so," replied her aunt, who was considerably disturbed by the abnormal state of matters. She even went so far as to talk to Mrs Bennett about her niece, and came away comforted by the suggestion that Muriel would feel more settled by-and-by, but that no doubt just now her mind was recurring to her troubles of a year ago.

Mrs Bennett fully believed this to be the case, and she was right in part, though many contending feelings were stirring in Muriel's mind. She concealed them all, however, and paid her farewell visits in the village and at the manse with a cheerful face, but without a syllable of remem-

brance for Ronald, then absent at Broomieknowe.

When the news of Laura's intended marriage reached her, she was conscious of a slight, a very slight, feeling of relief. Ronald had not, after all, meant anything by his sudden friendship for her; and she was glad—for Laura was not, she thought, the wife for him. Her father had spoken well of this Mr Harris; and she could, and did, write a very pleasant and cordial letter to the bride, and sent her besides a handsome gift. The next important news from home was of a more startling nature, and when she found that Ronald was to set off instantly for a fresh campaign, sudden tears blinded her eyes, though she only said, "Poor, poor mamsie!"

After debate with herself, she wrote as short a note as could well be penned, but which came as a messenger of hope and

comfort to Ronald ere he went. "I cannot let you go without wishing you God-speed. I trust you may return safe.—M. L." That was all ; but Ronald placed it in a morocco case, and kept it with jealous care.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CLOUDS CLEARING AWAY.

RONALD had but few arrangements to make before he left Britain ; but one favour he begged at Laura's hands, though not without previously consulting Harris.

He told her the story of Ellen Jenkins's life as he knew and guessed at it, explaining how she had turned naturally to him in her difficulties. He then gave her the address which, with a brief note assuring him of her wellbeing, he had received the day six weeks that he had left her in her London rooms.

The punctuality with which she had reckoned the time, touched him ; but he

thought it best to send her only a note as brief as her own, in which he told her not to dread pursuit. Now that he was leaving the country, he asked if Laura would fill for this forlorn soul the place that he could hold no longer. He did not ask her to trouble herself greatly; all he hoped was that she would call once and see her when in London, and allow her to feel that in any case of misfortune or illness, for example, she might turn to her for assistance.

Laura gave the required promise readily, and begged Ronald to rest satisfied that she would fulfil it to the utmost of her power.

"Thank you," he replied; "it will be a good thing for Mrs Jenkins that I am going away, for she will have gained a friend who can help her in many ways impossible to me."

"Yes, a woman can be of more use to

her. Tell me, was it she who gave you the needle-book that Captain Badger once spoke of?"

"Yes, she gave it me just as we were starting for the campaign, and I kept it and brought it home. Hers was the kindest face I saw when I left: many other people lamented our going, because we helped them to amuse themselves, but there was no selfishness in poor little Ellen's farewell."

"I wish you had told us about her sooner; we all thought——" heedless Laura stopped abruptly, and wished that she could recall her words.

"Tell me what you thought—I should like to know," said Ronald, gravely.

"It was another horrid story that that dreadful man told us. He gave me to understand that you had been engaged to this girl, but had quarrelled, or rather you had parted from her."

"Jilted her, you mean."

"Yes, and that you still remembered her."

"Who heard all this?"

"We all did, here and at Inverallan."

Laura saw the same changed expression flit over Ronald's face that had crossed it before at the mention of Mrs Leslie's name, and now regretted bitterly that she had ever repeated Captain Badger's gossip to Miss Forbes.

"And did anybody believe it? Pray tell me honestly."

"I don't think any of us really did; but I for one was silly, and thought there might be something. Oh, Mr Bennett, I am so dreadfully sorry; it seems as if we had all behaved so cruelly to you," cried Laura, almost with tears in her eyes.

"Indeed you must not say that. You were a little rash, perhaps, in crediting gossip, but the folly was mine. I should have found that fellow out sooner."

"You should have told some one—Sir Duncan or some one—about Ellen, and there would have been no mystery," said Laura.

"Should I? Think a moment; one does not tell any one that a woman has cared for one, unless for some very exceptional reason."

"No, you are quite right, but it was a pity."

"Not if it was right. I would not have it otherwise. If I have told you her story now, it is for the sake of securing your sympathy for her, and for one other reason."

"And that is?"

"You shall hear it by-and-by," replied Ronald, "not now. But please remember this—I never for one moment thought of Ellen Smith or of any other woman in India as a woman I could love."

It was not till a few weeks after her marriage that Laura heard the other reason

of Ronald's sudden confidence in her. She was sitting at breakfast with her husband, who was proposing that she should go that morning to St Jude's Hospital and visit Mrs Jenkins.

" You had a long conversation with Bennett about her before he left, had you not ? " said he.

" Yes, he told me all about her."

" And something about himself, didn't he."

" Yes ; did he speak to you about it ? "

" He asked my opinion before confiding that poor little woman's history to you, and added details to me that he could not speak of to you ; perhaps I may talk to you of them by-and-by. He also left a message for you, to be given you by me."

" What was it ? " asked Laura, impressed by her husband's grave tones.

" He said he had asked you to remember something about his own history ; and if he

falls in this campaign, he wished you to repeat it as his parting message to Mrs Leslie."

"Oh, poor fellow ! I see, I see. I thought more than once that he loved her ; and, Jack, I am sure there has been some quarrel, some difference, between them. You know he never met her after that unlucky journey to London. Can he have proposed to her?"

"No, that I am sure he didn't. He told me one day that the only woman he cared for was utterly out of his reach ; but I never thought of her. Poor old Bennett ! I'm awfully sorry for him."

"I wonder, then, if there has been a misunderstanding about Ellen Jenkins. I know Miss Forbes was very much taken up about her. If so, I might be able to put it right ; and oh, Jack, wouldn't that be delightful ?"

"Very, dear ; but you must be cautious, lest you make matters worse than they are."

"Well, I think I shall try; and now we'll go to St Jude's."

Ellen Jenkins was fast becoming an experienced nurse; she had taken to her new work, and in caring for the sufferings of others, had learnt to forget herself, and had become more patient and courageous. She was thin and pale still, but her eyes had lost their startled look, and her voice its irritable tone.

It was with unmixed surprise that she heard that a lady wished to see her; and Laura's ready sympathy was touched by the rapid change on her face from business-like attention to keen pleasure when she introduced herself as a friend of Mr Bennett's.

"Oh, ma'am, how is he? I haven't heard of him for such a long time."

The bright expression faded again when Laura explained that he had gone abroad on active service. "But he wished me to come and see you, and give you my address,

that you might feel you had a friend to rely on."

"Did he? And he thought of me in the midst of his own trouble—for leave-taking is a hard thing. He has the kindest, truest heart I ever knew, and I wish I could show my gratitude to him."

"I will write and tell him anything you like about yourself."

"Then tell him, ma'am, that I'm happy and comfortable, and that I feel I owe it all to him. I'd never have had courage to keep to the work at first if I hadn't known how disappointed he'd be if I were to fail, and I feared to bring trouble on him besides."

"Well, I hope to see more of you, Mrs Jenkins; and the first time you are able to get out for a day, you must come over to us."

"That will be a great treat, ma'am,—I do feel lonely now and then," replied Ellen

gratefully, and went back to her work with a cheerier heart.

When Mr and Mrs Harris came to town again some weeks later and Laura returned to St Jude's, she found Ellen barely recovered from a fever caught from one of the patients. She was now paler and thinner than ever, and the matron of the hospital remarked that if she had any friends who could afford to give her rest and change, it would be the saving of her.

Mrs Harris replied that she would see what could be done, and drove off to consult her husband.

"Jack, dear, I have such a scheme to tell you!" she began, eagerly drawing away the newspaper that he was reading.

"And I am expected to have some share in it—I know that by the tone in which you say 'dear' Jack," replied Harris, smilingly.

"You have only to agree to all I say,

like a dutiful husband," rejoined Laura, proceeding to unfold her plan. They were going soon to Broomieknowe to pay a long visit; why should they not take Ellen with them? It would do her a world of good.

"But could we not do her as much good a little nearer at hand?"

"No; because, dear Jack, I want her to see Mrs Leslie."

"Whew! That's what you're at, is it?"

"I'm sure, if Mrs Leslie once heard her talk of Ronald, she would banish all doubts of him from her mind, if she has any; and you know, Jack, Mrs Jenkins will be a good deal with me, and little by little I might manage to suggest to her the sort of thing she should say. I mean, you know, that she might easily be led on to talk in such a way as to show that she never imagined he cared for her."

"Oh, you scheming woman! Upon my word, the plan isn't half a bad one. I'd like

uncommonly to pave the way for Bennett, if I thought there were a ghost of a chance of Mrs Leslie marrying him in the end. He's far too good a fellow for any woman to turn up her nose at him."

" You mark my words, Jack : he has been mentioned in despatches already, and if he goes on at this rate, and comes home with any more honours, Mrs Leslie will either marry him or—she's made of granite," said Laura, energetically.

Arrangements were easily made for Ellen's journey to Scotland. Hardwicke said he would be delighted to receive her, as he would have been delighted to accommodate a houseful of sick people, if his sister had expressed any wish to bring them.

Ellen herself was at first somewhat startled at the proposal. To go to Scotland seemed to her to be perilous, since her husband was still there, although he had moved to Glasgow. But when Mrs

Harris explained to her that she would be in as safe a retreat as if she were in London, she allowed herself to rejoice without restraint in the prospect of the holiday.

The night journey fatigued her terribly, for in her weak state she could not control the agitating recollections which thronged upon her and kept her wakeful; so that when she arrived at Broomieknowe, she was carried to her room, and did not leave it again for many days, during which there was, of course, no mention of Muriel.

Laura, however, who was a frequent visitor at Inverallan, lost no time in telling her friends about her guest, and about the manner in which she had been confided to her care. While Sir Duncan and Miss Forbes listened with interest to her tale, she observed, without seeming to do so, that Muriel's head suddenly bent down lower over her work, as though to examine a pattern, and that Muriel's fingers were

hardly so steady as they might have been.

"I am sure I am right, Jack," said she afterwards, "and I shall make a point of talking of Mr Bennett and praising him whenever I can."

Acting on this idea, Laura took every opportunity of alluding to Ronald. Now it was of her own liking for him that she spoke; now of her husband's respect for his opinion. Again, she took over a letter that Jack had just received, and that she was sure all his friends would be glad to see; and sometimes, if she happened to be alone with Mrs Leslie, she would allude in feeling terms to Ellen's grateful devotion.

This topic, she fancied, was not altogether as welcome as the others; and she therefore insisted on it the more—feeling, with a woman's quick instinct, that the more she could strengthen Mrs Leslie's present suspicions or doubts, the more complete would

be the reaction when she should discover her error.

"I only hope he won't be killed, poor fellow, before you have finished your manœuvring," remarked Harris, who was always informed of the result of his wife's efforts.

"Oh, Jack, I trust not! It will be too dreadful for his poor mother if anything befalls him, because, you know, they say that old Mr Bennett is failing very fast."

A great change was, in fact, impending in Tillybodle—that change which hangs like a perpetual doom over English vicarage and Scotch manse alike, and because of which the children of the house can never expect to return year after year, when their own children perhaps are grown up, to the old home of their youth. Sooner or later the father must go out of its walls, and a stranger enter, and change all the dear familiar rooms and ways.

By gradual steps Mrs Bennett had

learned to realise that for her this change was imminent. First, the minister had felt the winter cold to an unusual degree, and had begun to wrap himself up with a new carefulness. In spite of care, he had been laid up with a severe attack of bronchitis, and although he considered himself fully recovered, the hacking cough that his wife dreaded to hear, never left him. The doctor shook his head, and Sir Duncan talked of a warmer climate and much-needed rest. But Mr Bennett would listen to neither, and at last, when pressed upon the subject, replied, “If I need patching up by rest and warmth, I can be worth very little. While I live, I must work ; and if I die, I die at my post.”

He worked on, therefore,—visiting a sick parishioner in all weathers,—till at last he was laid up, and this time with inflammation of the lungs.

When Ellen Jenkins, now rapidly re-

covering, heard of his illness, she implored to be allowed to go and nurse him.

"But you are not able for such work yet," expostulated Laura.

"I am not very strong, but I could do a great deal. I could at least watch, and let others sleep, and it would be such a happiness to me to be of some service to Mr Bennett's family. Oh, Mrs Harris, do ask if I may come!"

Thus appealed to, Laura drove off to the manse, and found that Mrs Bennett would willingly accept more skilful help than she could easily obtain, and was glad, moreover, of the opportunity of seeing the woman for whom her son had asked her help and sympathy. Laura therefore returned to fetch Mrs Jenkins, and saw her installed in the sick-room, where Mrs Bennett left her in charge while she obtained a little rest.

Muriel called daily to inquire for the

invalid, and on the next morning it was Ellen who came to report upon his state.

"Are you Mrs Jenkins?" asked Muriel, feeling pretty sure of the new nurse's identity.

"Yes, ma'am; Mrs Harris was kind enough to bring me over yesterday afternoon."

"She must have been a very pretty girl once," thought Muriel, as she drove home. "I think I should like to talk to her, if I have an opportunity."

The opportunity soon came; for when Muriel entered the little dining-room one day, where things were already beginning to wear the disorganised appearance that so often accompanies illness in a house, she found Ellen getting breakfast.

"Don't get up," said Muriel; "I see Mrs Bennett has had her breakfast. Is she up-stairs?"

"Yes, ma'am, and she sent me here for

mine," replied Ellen, still standing: she was particularly deferential in her manner to Mrs Leslie.

"Please do go on, or I must run away," said Muriel. "Let me pour you out some more tea. How is Mr Bennett?"

"I'm afraid he's worse, ma'am; and it is very sad for Mrs Bennett, with Mr Ronald away."

"Yes," replied Muriel, with a quick glance at her companion, who met it steadily. "You were a great friend of his, were you not, in India?"

"I, ma'am! Oh dear, no! Why, I was only a sergeant's daughter; and though Mr Jenkins is a commissioned officer, yet I know well enough he was never fit to associate with gentlemen, and I never was educated like a lady. Mr Ronald was always as kind as any one could be to me, but he never made a friend of any one in my rank in life—any woman, I mean.

Surely you who know him so well should know that," said Ellen, a little sharply. She was quick-witted, and Laura's hints had conveyed more perhaps than had been intended, so that now she felt almost angry with this beautiful grave lady, who had not known how to believe Ronald Bennett ! Was she foolish, Ellen wondered, as well as beautiful.

"Indeed ; I heard you had known him so very well," replied Muriel, quietly: she was beginning to see a gleam of light which might dispel her doubts, and she longed to make it clearer.

"Then you heard a wicked story, ma'am. I must not stand talking, but I wish you would be so good as to ask Mrs Harris about me. *She* understands and can explain everything better than I can."

Ellen spoke with some temper; for it hurt her sorely to think that she, who owed everything to Ronald, should be a

cause of sorrow to him. She could well imagine that if he were to love, his affection would be deep and lasting, and she was resolved that no tale about her should stand in his way. Her reply contained a sting for Muriel : it was certainly a new thing for her to hear that gay Laura Harris could understand and explain to her Ronald's conduct and affairs. Nevertheless she answered very gently.

"I did not mean to vex you," she said, and went on to speak further of the invalid.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE LAST HOME-COMING.

MR BENNETT passed away very quietly, when the sun was getting low and a red light slanted into his room from the west.

“Give my love and blessing to Ronald, wife.” These were his last words, and Marian Bennett did not grudge them to the absent boy, who was now almost her only tie.

All the village turned out to the minister’s funeral, for however little some of his parishioners may have loved him, they all recognised his devotion to the right.

“He was a God-fearing man, Jamie,” said Sir Duncan to the old shoemaker,

who, though he remained near the gate of the kirkyard, had closed his shop and come to pay what respect he could to Ronald's father.

"Ay, he was that, Sir Duncan; but to my thinkin', Maistress Leslie's releegion is the best. The minister he was aye for drivin' a body, but Mrs Leslie she's aye lead-leadin' ye, till ye gang the gait she'd hae ye afore ye ken whaur ye are."

"They both mean the same in the end, though, Jamie."

"I'm no sure o' that. There's a wheen things canna be settled sae easy's we think; and I suspec', gin a' thochts were kenned, that Maistress Leslie wad show a bonnier kind o' notions than ever lichted yon puir body's heid."

Sir Duncan and Muriel were very anxious that Mrs Bennett should come and remain at Inverallan until she could fix on some fresh abode for herself. It would be diffi-

cult to find exactly the kind of house she required,—one which should be neither too large and costly, nor yet too small, to be a pleasant home for Ronald when he should return. To Muriel's great surprise and disappointment, however, she declined to stay at the Hall. She was not equal to it, she said, and would rather remain as quiet as possible, till she should leave the manse for good.

Sir Duncan tried in vain to combat this resolve, although he strongly suspected that it was useless to do so, for that his old friend's decision was caused by something more than a disinclination for exertion. In truth, Mrs Bennett could not forgive Muriel for her coldness towards Ronald, and, moreover, regretted deeply the useless devotion to her which prevented him from making for himself the home to which he might have naturally looked forward, and

in which she might perhaps have held grandchildren in her arms.

She had brooded over this deprivation on her boy's account, till she had come to feel almost angrily towards the innocent cause of it; and with these thoughts rankling in her heart, she could not accept the hospitality of Inverallan Hall. A new friend, however, stepped forward and settled the question of her abode in her own kindly garrulous fashion.

Miss Anne Hardwicke had spare rooms in her house, and did not see the good of letting them always stand empty. It was a deal of trouble to keep them wholesomely aired. Now if Mrs Bennett and her old Nancy would come and use them, sharing the housekeeping in a sensible way, it would be a capital arrangement for both. They were two lone women, and would cheer each other, "and maybe quarrel a bit whiles, just

to keep themselves from being dull," said Miss Anne, with a twinkle in her eyes ; and Nance would be invaluable—"A steady responsible person, to keep order with the two lassies, and see the back gate shut at nights."

To this offer Mrs Bennett readily agreed ; and having packed up and stored away all the pretty gifts and accumulated property out of the manse, she was driven in to Stirling and deposited at Miss Anne's villa by Mrs Harris. Here a cosy tea and a kind welcome awaited her, and—"Here you'll just bide, my dear," said Miss Anne, "till this awful war's over, and you see what your son is going to do for himself in life. Maybe he'll want you if he leaves the army, and maybe he'll marry and no' want you, and if he doesn't need you, you'll stay here."

It said much for both the ladies, and still more for the domestics, that as time went

on, the little household at the villa was not only cheerful and contented, but even happy; and if any bickerings arose in the kitchen, or coolness in the parlour, they were of such brief duration that they were forgotten by next day.

In the flitting from the manse, Ellen Jenkins had been of the greatest service; and when Mrs Bennett parted from her, it was with cordial good wishes and mutual esteem. She went back to her hospital shortly afterwards, invigorated in body and mind, and no longer felt herself friendless and forlorn. Before she left Broomieknowe, she earnestly entreated Laura to inquire if any doubt about her lingered in Mrs Leslie's mind; and if so, to remove it.

“If it's she, as I suppose, that Mr Ronald cares for, I think she's not half good enough for him,” said she indignantly, for she had grown very confidential with Mrs Harris of late; but Laura only smiled at this remark,

and said there might be two opinions on that subject. Nevertheless she did speak to Muriel, who repeated that she had imagined Ellen to have been a friend of Ronald's in old days.

"I wish you could have heard how strongly he disclaimed any idea of the kind. I can't repeat his words, though I wish I might. He spoke to me about her just before he sailed. I never knew any one more constant or more devoted, but not to Ellen Jenkins; and I think myself he's far too patient," said Laura impetuously, and took her leave. Nor did she visit Inverallan again for some time, for she read in Muriel's heightened colour that her meaning was well understood.

Absence was pleading for Ronald even more strongly than the praises of his friends, and much of Muriel's apparent coldness sprang in truth from a certain horror of herself that possessed her when she found that

her thoughts were turning oftener to the living soldier engaged in a perilous war, than to the dead hero who lay buried at Maiwand. She made the discovery as she sat by the fire in her own room one winter's night, when the wind was howling in sudden tempestuous gusts, and the driving sleet struck sharply on the panes.

There had been unpleasant rumours in the papers that day, telegrams betraying anxiety, and talk of an impending battle. Ever since she read the news, her thoughts had strayed away from her work and her book to the terrible defile, where perhaps at that moment the fight might be going on; and now again at her fireside she thought with dread of what might have happened. She changed her position, and her eye fell on her husband's portrait, which stood on a little table opposite to her; and as the firelight flickered on it, the lips almost seemed to smile.

With a sudden pang she realised that not one thought had she spared to him that day, and with the whispered appeal, "Oh, Frank, Frank!" hid her face in her hands, and blushed with shame at her own faithlessness. What had come to her? Of what base inconstancy, what weak fickleness, was she guilty? Questioning herself thus confusedly, she obtained no very clear answer to her amazed doubts, and hastened to bed, as though to hide from her own fancies, or perhaps from the kindly laughing eyes of the portrait on her table. Nevertheless it was not Frank's glad countenance that gazed upon her out of the mist of strife that troubled her dreams, but a grave, bronzed face, with brown beard and sad grey eyes.

Yet a few days passed before the expected action was fought, and to Muriel they were a time of perplexity and trouble. She was too honest to deceive herself, or seek to create a phantom devotion in her

heart, but it was a shock to her whole nature when she realised that her tender memory of Leslie no longer filled all the intervals of her life as it had been wont to do.

She could not have breathed a syllable of her perplexed feelings to her most intimate friend, and even to her father she could say nothing, especially as he now seldom or never mentioned Ronald's name to her. This very loneliness increased the longing for such close companionship and confidence as she had known in her happy wifehood, and prompted her also to regret Ronald's absence and recall his ready sympathy. If his mother could only find a house sufficiently near at hand, it would be very pleasant — thought she, trying to deceive herself still — if they were to resume, when he should be there on leave, the kindly relations that had been so rudely interrupted by his Quixotic care of Mrs

Jenkins. She would not trouble herself again about that speech that had vexed her, for she understood now that he had not thought of Ellen as a friend at all; therefore she could meet him on his return with her old kindness, and things would go on as before. Thus even the best of women will sometimes propose to themselves to accept, under the guise of friendship, that rare devotion which may be the noblest motive in a man's life, and will think that they need give nothing in return but a moderate regard.

Muriel's dream of the pleasant future was shattered when at last the anticipated battle was won, for in the dreaded list of names telegraphed home there appeared, among others—

“2d Highlanders—Lieutenant Bennett, wounded dangerously.”

Then indeed, by the terror that shook her, she learnt how great would be her

loss should further harm befall him, and in her dismay and self-abasement fled away to Edinburgh for a few days on some trivial excuse, leaving her father and aunt in a condition of perplexity at her unusual conduct.

In truth, she could not bear to be with them—to be seen, to be observed—during the conflict that was taking place in her mind. She needed to be alone, that she might recover her balance, and also watch, herself unwatched, for further news.

“What is the matter with Muriel, Duncan?” said Miss Forbes. “I’m sure she can’t have any shopping to do that should take her off in such a hurry. It is very odd!”

“I should say the shopping is an excuse, and that she wishes to have a change,” replied Sir Duncan.

“But why not go to some of her friends, then? Why choose Edinburgh, when the east winds are so dreadful? And why

could she not tell me she required a change? I could have gone with her anywhere she liked."

"Muriel has had a home of her own, Alicia, and there may be times when she would rather be away from us," replied Sir Duncan, discriminately; but he could not silence his sister's plaintive cry, "It is so very odd!"

"The wounded are doing well." These five words conveyed comfort to the anxious women in the little villa at Stirling, as well as to Muriel in her Edinburgh hotel, and she presently determined to return home again, having attained to a calmer if not a more subdued frame of mind.

She stayed a couple of hours in Stirling on her way, in order to see Mrs Bennett, and spoke with a shy restraint of Ronald, which, when she was gone, the two old ladies attributed to pride.

"Bennett is certainly one of the luckiest fellows I ever knew—professionally, I mean," said Sir Duncan at dinner on the night of his daughter's return. "You see he has again been in the hottest part of the fight."

"I suppose he makes the most of his opportunities," replied Muriel.

"No doubt he does—in war; he doesn't make much of them in peace, poor fellow!" replied her father.

"What do you mean, Duncan?" asked Miss Alicia.

"It may be a fancy on my part, but I cannot help thinking he might have married Laura Hardwicke, and stayed at home with a good wife and a fortune," replied Sir Duncan.

"I wish he had," said his sister; "you liked him so much, you know, and they would have been charming neighbours,—wouldn't they, Muriel?"

"It would have been pleasant for papa,"

replied Muriel, secretly wondering what grounds her father had for his surmise. She wished that Ronald's name would not recur so often : it seemed as though she could not escape from the thought of him.

It was in the early spring that he came home—recovered indeed, but with his right arm somewhat crippled, so that it was doubtful if he would be able to remain in the service. There was no flowery arch or village crowd awaiting him now ; but Miss Hardwicke, whose spectacles somehow required frequent wiping that morning, ate her own breakfast in some unknown corner, and kept herself out of sight, so that mother and son might meet and talk of their lost home unwatched by any stranger's eye.

When at last she made her appearance in the little drawing - room, and Ronald thanked her for her kind care of his mother, she received his words with a little air of dignity ; but presently, when he had

resumed his seat and she had scanned him with her keen blue eyes, she went suddenly up to him and patted his brown hair as though he had been a child.

“ You’re a good son, and I’m glad to see you here, my dear. I’ve heard a deal about you from my nephew, and from more besides, and if you can make your home here with us, you’ll be welcome ; and let me tell you that, except my boy Ernest, there’s not another young man for whom I’d say as much.”

Ronald’s only reply was to lift the old lady’s hand to his lips, which action amused as well as pleased her.

“ You’ve lived too late, laddie,” said she. “ I think you’ve an auld-world way about you that suits an old woman like me. How you’ve kept it in these days, when men have forgotten how to be polite, and young lassies have forgotten how to keep themselves to themselves, passes my comprehension.”

A day or two after his arrival, Sir Duncan and his daughter came to call. It seemed to the latter that in this way the inevitable meeting would be more easily got over, and that she might second without remark the invitation which her father intended to give. Ronald thought her depressed and silent; but though he spoke to her but little, he paused for an instant before he replied to Sir Duncan's request that he would come and stay at Inverallan.

Muriel observed the pause, and filled it. "We hope you will be able to come," she said, in a lower tone than was usual with her.

"Certainly; it will give me great pleasure—that is, if you will let me defer my visit till I have been to Edinburgh. I want to see the best surgeon at once, so as to determine my plans for the future."

"And what will you do if you have to leave the service?"

"I do not know. My mother will not let me speak of emigration unless she accompanies me, and I should require to be very sure of my prospects before I could allow that."

"Indeed! I'm going to put a spoke in that wheel too," said Miss Hardwicke; "if you don't take care, you'll have two old ladies coming to look after you,—I can't be left to myself again."

"If you will wait till I've got an American farm in good order for you, you will be welcome," said Ronald, smiling; and it appeared to Muriel, as she listened, that he spoke with a light heart. Surely if there ever had been any truth in the idea at which Laura Harris had so plainly hinted,—if he ever had entertained any feeling beyond friendship for herself,—it must have died out ere now. What else, indeed, could she expect, when she had treated him with such marked coldness and mistrust—

and that, too, at a time when all his friends were praising him ? She had set herself apart from him, and now he had ceased to regard her.

Thinking these things, she felt herself humbled in her own eyes, and waited patiently for the verdict of the surgeon, and the consequent decision as to Ronald's plans.

He was not left in doubt as to his future. He would recover to a certain extent the use of his arm ; but he would be wise if he left the service, and underwent no further exposure to those vicissitudes of climate in which the British soldier is expected to do his work.

He accepted the decision quietly, though, when it came to the point, it was not easy to quit the profession, and the regiment which had been his home for so many years.

“ What will you do with that old uni-

form, Ronald ? It's no use, is it ?" asked his mother one day, when she found him laying away together his soldier's clothes.

"I shall keep it, mother," he answered, with an odd laugh. " You may think it sentimental, but I couldn't throw away that coat, stained as it is. As long as I live, my heart will warm to the old tartan and the sound of the pipes. It's hard lines that I shan't be in the dear old corps when it comes home, though I'll see it land, if I'm anywhere in Britain."

"There's a deal of romance in the laddie," said Miss Hardwicke, to whom Mrs Bennett repeated this speech—"a deal of romance. But mark my words : he's leaving the army at the right time ; if he stayed in it, the romance would burn as dull as the fire Jean lit with damp kindling this morning."

"Why so ?" said Mrs Bennett.

"Why so ? Why, because Ronald's a

lad of spirit, and he'll not go daundering about with a cigar in his mouth, and clothes on his back that make him look like a tailor's advertisement. It puts me past my patience to see the young officers toddling down the town together of an afternoon. Don't you tell me Ronald would be content to do the like," replied Miss Anne, energetically ; and Mrs Bennett did not contradict her, but nodded her head sagely, and said, "Quite true, my dear—quite true."

CHAPTER XL.

TIME BRINGS EVERYTHING TO HIM WHO
CAN WAIT.

RONALD's promised visit to Inverallan was brief, and seemingly uneventful. He must hurry away, he said, and begin his inquiries respecting farms in America, for he could not endure to be idle longer than was necessary.

Very soon his plans began to take definite shape, and once and again he came over from Stirling to consult Sir Duncan, who listened and advised, and regretted his decision.

"I think it's a great pity you should go away, Ronald ; you had much better marry

and stay at home," said he; but Ronald made no reply.

A second time he made the suggestion, when over their claret they were discussing the merits of rival American land companies.

"You'll have to find a wife out there, since you cannot make up your mind to settle at home," said Sir Duncan.

This time Ronald looked him in the face. "You have said that before, Sir Duncan, and as I am to leave soon, I may as well answer it. I shall never marry, for I can love but one woman in the world, and she would think my love an insult if I were to utter it."

"Are you sure of that?" said Sir Duncan, slowly; and answering his companion's startled look, he continued, "My dear boy, I think I have known it since my daughter and I read a note of yours, written before her marriage."

"No doubt you have, Sir Duncan."

"Then I can only say, that if you choose to speak, you have my permission, so far as that is needed, and I may add, my good wishes."

"Are you in earnest? is it possible, Sir Duncan?" stammered Ronald.

"Certainly I am in earnest. No woman should consider herself otherwise than honoured by such a faithful affection as yours; and I think a woman might well trust you."

"Ah, that is just what Mrs Leslie does not do."

"I am not so sure. At least you can ask an explanation of her mistrust, if you choose."

"If I choose! Good heavens, Sir Duncan, say if I dared! Why, it seems madness!" cried Ronald, springing up, and turning away from his old friend, he leant against the mantelpiece behind him in a whirl of conflicting hopes and fears.

"I will risk my fate," he said, presently, "since you do not think it unpardonable presumption; but I must choose a moment when I am cooler," he added, smiling.

"You need not go home till late to-morrow," replied Sir Duncan; "and now we will join the ladies."

Ronald made his opportunity somewhat skilfully on the following afternoon; for though he had hardly a spark of hope, he did not wish to undergo one needless hour of suspense.

"It is a long time since I have been in the picture-gallery, Mrs Leslie—I have a fancy to see your favourite old Jacobite again," said he.

"Let us go and look at him, then," replied Muriel, and unsuspectingly led the way to the low ottoman which was placed opposite to the picture of which she was so proud.

"Do you remember telling me here that

you liked soldiers? You were a very little girl then."

"Yes, I remember, and how you said you wished to be one."

"Naturally, since you liked the profession. Your word was law to me always," said Ronald quickly, and Muriel coloured as she glanced up at him.

"Mrs Leslie, will you do me a favour?"

"If I can. What is it?" she asked, almost timidly.

"Will you tell me what it was I said or did that made you think I had not acted truthfully? I heard of your impression from Sir Duncan, though I did not need any one to tell me that your friendship for me was lessened."

"Do you remember driving with me to the plantation? I asked you about your friends."

"I remember it only too well. I was so happy that day, till we were getting out of

the carriage, when your manner changed all at once. What had I done ? ”

“ You said you did not even know where any of your friends were,—and I knew Mrs Jenkins was in Edinburgh, and that you had seen her,” replied Muriel, very low.

There was a moment’s silence, and Ronald laughed a short bitter laugh of scorn at the thought that he had even for a moment fancied he could win this woman. Why, she had not even troubled herself to understand what he had told her of himself ! How beautiful she looked just now, sitting there ! for she had suddenly sunk on to the ottoman. How beautiful, and how utterly out of his reach ! He would at least speak to her honestly for once—would tell her the whole truth—and then free himself from chains he had worn too long.

“ So it was poor little Ellen who unconsciously caused me so much pain. Perhaps

I was a fool to feel it as deeply as I did. You never guessed how your changed voice and cold looks stung me. You have never cared to understand what has been the main influence in my whole life. Why should you, indeed? But I will speak now before I leave you, Mrs Leslie, and you must listen—just this once. I answered your question quite truthfully. Had I not told you I had no friends among the sergeants' wives or daughters? *Friends!* Did you think I could drop quite easily from your society and your friendship to theirs? For you were my friend once—when we were happy children—and I loved you then, and have loved you always! Once I fancied it would be enough for me to live near you—to help you, to be near at hand if you needed me—and I sought no greater reward than your kindness and your goodwill; but that dream is over. You mistrusted me

and doubted me, and when I went away I knew that the life I had spent here could never be resumed. Now that I have returned, I know more. I know that I am not strong enough to remain so near you, and yet so far away. You are too beautiful—too dear. But I have courage enough to leave you for ever, and make a home for my mother elsewhere ; and all the more so, that I have dared this once to say what is in my heart. You are the only woman I ever loved, and I have loved you beyond everything in the world. Now can you pardon me enough to bid me good-bye ? ”

He waited for a reply, but none came. Muriel's face was hidden in her hands, and he saw that she was trembling.

“ Not one word of farewell ? Then I must go unforgiven. Good - bye, Mrs Leslie.”

He spoke slowly and sadly, now that

the passion of his first words had passed, and slowly he turned away and moved a step or two towards the door.

"Ronald!"

It was the faintest whisper; but he heard it, and as he paused and looked at her, the fleeting glimpse he caught of her face ere she hid it again brought him back to her side.

"Yes. What have you to say to me?" he asked, in an eager whisper.

"Don't—go—away from me!"

"Muriel!" He had not uttered the sweet old name for years, and now it came tremblingly, as he knelt beside her, and very gently touching the slender wrists, tried to draw her hands away from her face.

Suddenly the hands yielded themselves up to him, and tearful, happy eyes looked into his.

"Forgive me, Ronald. I will tell you

about it all some day. I was very wrong, but——”

What the but was remained unsaid, as Ronald drew her to him and knew that at last he had won his crown. In the first tumult of this sudden change he found but few words; but by-and-by he rose, and still holding her hands bade her look up and answer him once fully.

“Let me hear you say you are content. Say that you are sure you care — that you are sure you are not afraid to trust me ?”

“Quite sure, Ronald.”

“O Muriel ! my Muriel ! This is beyond my dreams. My queen, what a beautiful thing our life shall be !”

“I am very glad, my dear,” said Sir Duncan, when his daughter sought him in the library ; “there’s little enough love of a noble kind in the world, and such affection as Ronald’s deserves to be re-

warded. I'm growing old, too, and I can leave you contentedly in his care. Well, well, I'll say no more of that, for he must not see tears in your eyes to-day. By the by, Muriel, perhaps I had better tell aunt Alicia?"

"Poor aunt Alicia! Yes, I think you had," replied Muriel, smiling; and Sir Duncan went to find his sister at once, and threw her into a state of indescribable confusion.

"But, good gracious, my dear brother, the man is of no family whatever!" cried she. "Why, he has been a private soldier! Oh, I told you this would happen! Muriel to marry the minister's son! It is terrible! To be sure, Mrs Bennett was a Macgregor of Glen Monach; but dear, dear, what is that?"

"Her people have farmed the Glen for five generations: that is almost a pedigree, isn't it?" put in Sir Duncan, demurely.

"Oh, I daresay they have, or for fifty ; what does it matter ? Of course Macgregor is a good name, and Ronald himself has charming manners and is distinguished. Then his father's dead—I never liked *him*—and he has no tiresome relations."

"In fact, you will reconcile yourself to the marriage, and let no one say a word against it ?"

"*Of course* no one should say a word against it to me, now it is settled," replied Miss Forbes, with pride.

"Exactly, because he will be one of ourselves ; and, Alicia, if he makes our Muriel happy, and is a comfort to me, can't you forgive him his want of wealth or rank ? We are both growing old,—surely we rate love and worth higher than a family tree," said Sir Duncan, laying his hand on his sister's. Miss Forbes looked up at him silently for a moment, and her eyes glistened.

"Ah, Duncan, you always see the better side of things! Yes, my dear, you are quite right, and I will welcome Ronald as you wish. He's a good young man; and you know, Duncan, his mother was your wife's early friend."

Early next morning the newly-betrothed pair drove into Stirling, where their appearance together took Mrs Bennett and Miss Hardwicke by surprise.

"Mother, I have brought you a daughter," said Ronald, going up to Mrs Bennett; and Muriel, throwing back her veil, held out her hands, and looked at her with an imploring gaze that went to mamsie's heart.

"Muriel! My dear bairn, is it really true?" exclaimed the old lady, drawing her close; and in that warm embrace the shadow that had clouded their old affection passed away for ever. Nevertheless, when the carriage had driven away again,

mamsie resumed her place by the bow-window with a serious countenance.

"This is a great thing for Ronald," said Miss Hardwicke, a little doubtfully.

"Ay indeed, a thing that I hope may turn out well. He has loved her all his life, and love can endure much ; but it's a burden on a poor man to be the husband of a rich woman. I'd rather in some ways have seen him in a farmhouse of his own."

"Tut, tut ! Don't worry yourself with thinking that. The sweetest rose has the stiffest thorn ; but if Ronald has nothing worse to put up with than the sacrifice of a bit pride, I think he may say his thorns are not many."

"It isn't always the long thorn pricks the sorest," returned Mrs Bennett ; "the little ones rankle in the flesh."

"Well, then—little thorns or big ones, he must just grip and crush them. His wife's love will be a glove on his fingers," said

Miss Anne, nodding her head sagely, as one who had clear and decided views on the subject.

"I hope so—I hope so," replied Mrs Bennett, with a little sigh. She had known long years of wifehood, and she did not feel the same confidence as her spinster friend in her son's future happiness.

Meanwhile, after his return from Stirling, Ronald, with a step as light as his heart, walked into Jamie Paterson's shop.

"Good-day, Jamie. I'm come to bring you some news."

"Are you? What is't? Hae ye coft yersel' a kailyard ayont the seas?" asked Jamie grimly, for he had been terribly put about by the American scheme.

"No, Jamie, better than that."

"Eh! What d'ye say? Yer lookin' unco blithe, man; is it somethin' I'd like fine to hear? Oot wi' it!"

"I'm going to be married to——"

"Maistress Leslie," interrupted the shoemaker, and he snapped his fingers and uttered a "hoich!" worthy of the days of his youth, when he was the best reel-dancer in Tillybodle.

"I kenn't hoo it would be! I kenn't ye'd whustle the lavrock doun, and the nest's near by ye noo! The bonnie birdie'll bide amang her ain folk, and ye'll hae gotten what ye hae aye ettled at. 'Weel is that weel does,' and there's no sic anither as Maistress Leslie in the haill countryside. Losh, but it's grand news this!"

"I knew you'd be pleased, Jamie."

"Pleased, said ye? Pleased! I couldna think mair o't if I'd been in luck mysel'. No' that I want a wife; ye ken the byword, 'Next to nae wife a guid wife's the best.' But I maun tell ye a man likes fine whan things turn oot the way he's expeckit, and I aye said this wad be, suner or later. I didna say it to ither, ye ken, for it wadna

hae been weel-bred when you and she were freends wi' me, but I thocht it mony a day."

"Did you? It's more than I did, then."

"Hoots! What should you hae kenned aboot it? *I* kenned how she lookit when I tell't her—and I aye did tell her—that you were a sort o' commendable; and I saw ye haud yer heid a wee thing higher and speak o' ither things if I ca'd her a bonny lass. Ou ay, auld Jamie fand ye oot; but eh, man, ye gied me an awful stoun' whan ye cam ben yon day and tell't me ye were aff to Ameriky! Thinks I, it's a sair thing to hae your sicht and see twa blind bodies ganging aff the road, and no be able to set them on it. Weel, weel, I doubt I'll no hae leave to drink a glass to yer healths at this weddin'?"

"No indeed, Jamie; it would spoil the day, and Mrs Leslie would take it to heart."

"Forbye that I wadna like it mysel' ! I used to be kind o' ashamed to gae by the Rob Roy o' an evenin' wi'oot takin' a glass, but noo I'd be mair ashamed to gang into it. Folk 'ud hae a gran' lauch gin they see'd me the waur again."

Second only to the shoemaker in their exultation over his good fortune came Ronald's warm friends Jack and Laura Harris.

"By Jove, Bennett's done it ! Well, I am glad !" cried the former, as he tossed a note over to his wife at the breakfast-table.

Laura clapped her hands when she had read it, and as though that were not enough, ran round to her husband and gave him a hearty kiss.

" Didn't I tell you so ? Am I not a wise woman ? Haven't my little schemes turned out well ; and oh, isn't it delightful ? Speak, Jack—can't you ! "

" Yes, my dear, when you give me time. I believe you'll always say that you and

Mrs Jenkins arranged that match between you. In fact, you'll tell Bennett so some day. Now, won't you?"

"Jack! How absurd!" said Laura, who, nevertheless, would have dearly liked to hear that her husband considered the marriage had been brought about by her skilful management.

"I shall never say one word of the kind, for I am sure Mr Bennett would be dreadfully vexed. But what a perfectly happy couple they'll be! I never heard of an engagement that pleased me better."

"Nor I, except one, which came about in the drawing-room at Broomieknowe," returned Jack, who thought himself, as a married man, what as a lover he had never been expansive enough to call himself—the happiest fellow in the world.

"I must write to Mrs Jenkins at once," said Laura, hastening towards her pretty davenport.

"Do you think she will be quite pleased?" inquired Jack.

"Of course she will," answered his wife stoutly, as she sat down.

And Mrs Jenkins was pleased, though, like Mrs Bennett, her pleasure had a shade of doubt in it. The doubt found expression as she tacked together the materials for a blue satin handkerchief-sachet, on which the letters R. B. were traced in gold thread. She had risen in her profession, and was now enjoying an off-day in the Home to which she was attached; and as she smoothed and pulled and pinned the dainty stuff, she made a few confidential remarks to a buxom nurse who sat sewing on the other side of the round table.

"I'm very glad of the marriage—very; and I hope with my whole heart that Mr Bennett may find the lady all he thinks her—that I do."

"But you are not very sure of it, are you?" said the pretty nurse.

"I've no business to judge. Friends that know her say she's everything that could be wished; but I just wonder if her husband will think so ten years hence, that's all. She'll be satisfied, I daresay, whether he is or not."

Which of these two prophecies respecting Ronald's future will prove the truest?

Is the reality of love as sweet as he had dreamt that it might be? or does his idol appear a shade less perfect now that he has lifted it from the pedestal on which it was once raised above him?

No one can tell. Whether he secretly mourns a something lost with the old reverential worship, or whether the courage of his great affection makes the new aspects of his life even dearer than his dreams, no human being will ever know. Certain it is that that life is in the sight of others what

he said it should be — a beautiful thing ; and those who see Muriel's clear eyes and radiant smile, as she walks between her husband and her father to the moss-grown kirk, are satisfied that she at least enjoys such happiness as rarely falls to the lot of woman.

On one point only does Ronald refuse to listen to her, although she has already entreated him more than once to have his portrait taken in his beloved old uniform, in order that it may be hung in the picture-gallery.

“ Do you want to banish me from this spot where I won you ? ” he asked her one evening as they stood by the velvet ottoman. “ I should hate to see my own face gazing at me from the wall.”

“ But you ought to be there.”

“ Indeed, sweet wife, I see no reason why I should go down to posterity there among your ancestors. They are genuine

Forbeses, while I am Bennett - Forbes ; and they are, every one of them, greater men than I."

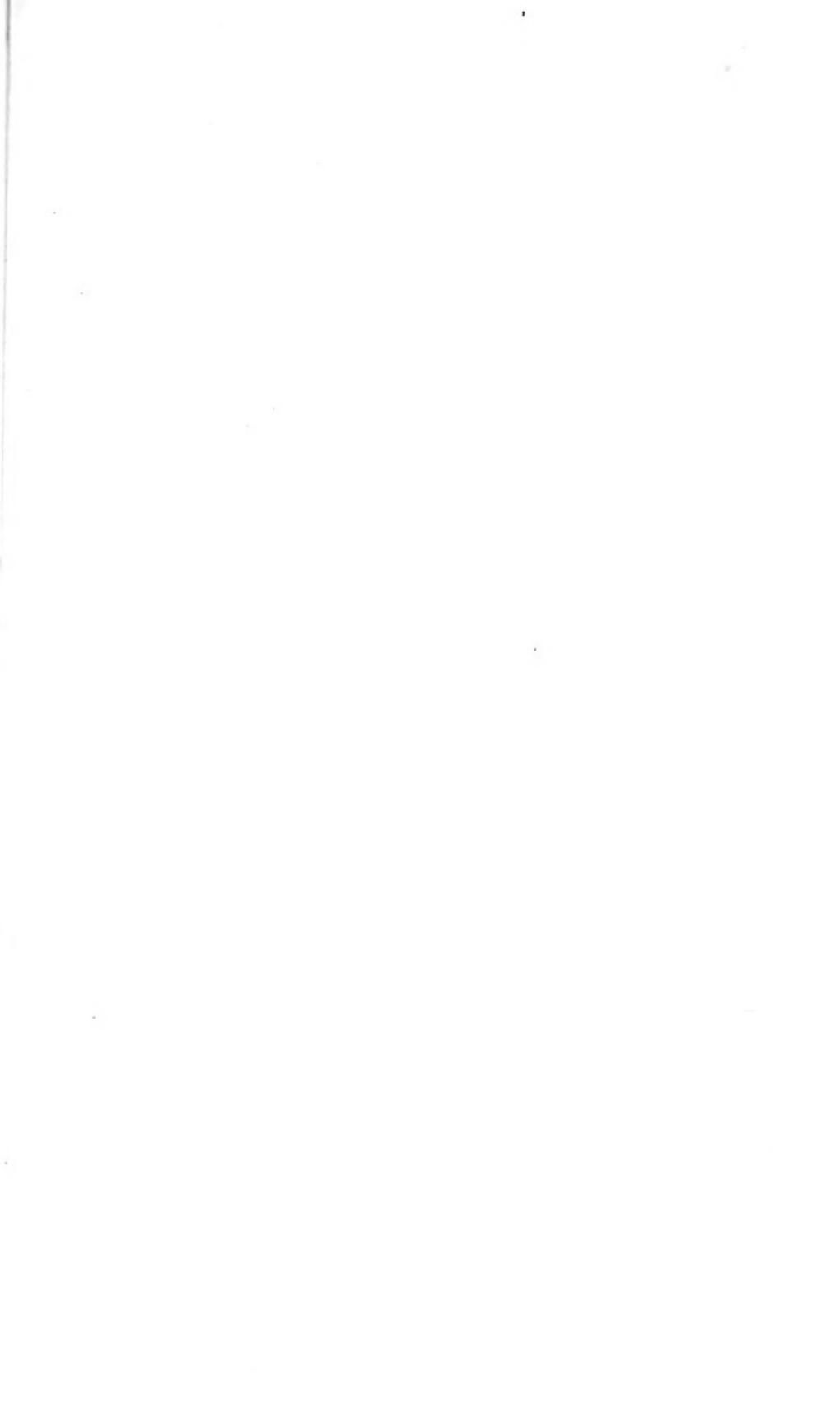
Then Muriel clasped her hands round his arm, and looked up proudly in his face.

"How so, Ronald ? When your portrait hangs beside our old Jacobite there, and those who come after us look at it by-and-by, they will know, as I do, that you did your duty by your Queen, your country, and your lady ; and no knight among all these could have done more !"

THE END.







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